

THE GHOST'S HIGH NOON

by
Carolyn
Wells --



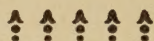
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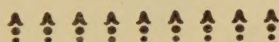
The Ghosts' High Noon

By the Same Author



The Doomed Five
Triple Murder
The Tapestry Room Murder
The Tannahill Tangle
The Crime in the Crypt
Where's Emily?
All At Sea
The Red-Haired Girl
The Bronze Hand
The Daughter of the House
Anything But the Truth
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The Furthest Fury
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The White Alley
Anybody But Anne
A Chain of Evidence
The Gold Bag
The Clue
Ptomaine Street

The Ghosts' High Noon



Carolyn Wells

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A Fleming Stone Story

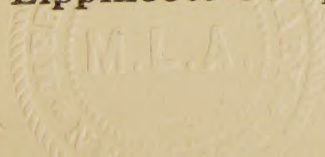
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TO
MY COMRADELY AND PLEASANT YOUNG FRIEND
THOMAS AUSTIN YAWKEY
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

The Ghosts' High Noon

*"When the night wind howls in the chimney cowl, and the
bat in the moonlight flies,*

*And inky clouds like funeral shrouds, sail over the midnight
skies —*

*When the footpads quail at the night-bird's wail, and black
dogs bay the moon,*

Then is the spectres' holiday—then is the ghosts' high noon!"

W. S. GILBERT.

Prologue

*"What though solemn shadows fall,
Sooner, later, over all?
Sing a merry madrigal."*

W. S. GILBERT.

AN OLD tale tells that as soon as God finished making Eden He felt sure He could improve upon it, so He made Algeciras.

Neither Spanish nor English, neither ancient nor modern, neither city nor country, this idyllic spot is pure and simple Paradise. Yet its Spanish influences prevent its being wholly pure, and its English leanings stand in the way of entire simplicity.

But these things only add to its charm and it remains a haloed memory to all who have known and loved it.

The piercing bright green of its trees, the brilliant tints of its flowers, the blue of its skies and the dazzling gold of its own special sunlight are things of such poignant beauty that the soul is stirred to a sensuous joy of sheer color.

Far away, the wine-dark sea gleams mysteriously and, growing blue as it nears the shore, breaks in white-crested waves of translucent green and gold.

In a grove, bosky with the waving branches of the great shade trees, sat two—a serene, fair-haired

girl and a dark-visaged man, with eager eyes and caressing voice.

The sun had set, and the young moon was sinking to the horizon in the half twilight. Across the bay could be faintly seen the lights of Gibraltar, and from the city square, not far off, came the wailing notes of "Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo."

The two were silent. With clasped hands and throbbing hearts they listened to the music,

"Reflejando la luna en su faz ——"

All of which had to do with a romantic episode beneath the harvest moon. It was sad, as all Spanish love songs are sad, and the tragic theme was matched by the throbbing, haunting melody.

They listened in silence as the last strain died away, and then the man spoke, softly, vibrantly: "You will stay, O my Best Beloved, you will stay with me ——"

The shadows grew a bit denser, a veritable Twilight of the Gods hovered over the grove, and the girl, though speaking no word, made no resistance as the man masterfully gathered her to him.

"You will stay!" exultantly now, and his face came closer to hers until the pale gold of her ashen hair lay against his own dark curls.

"Yes," she breathed, a mere sigh, and then again silence fell, broken only by the echoes of the music,

"Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo."

As if awaking from a dream, the girl stirred in his arms:

"But the *Catalonia* sails at nine; I shall be missed."

"Not as I shall miss you, if you leave me. But you won't, you *can't* leave me—you love me! Tell me so, Carita, Carissima—tell me so."

"I love you," murmured the girl, pale with emotion, as another might be flushed with joy, still with happiness, as another might quiver by reason of a bounding heart.

The south wind blew softly on the anchored ships and the little steamer that had brought them over went back to Gibraltar.

Over there, the great liner made ready, cast off and proceeded on her way across the Mediterranean, the last notes of the passionate love song wailed through the night, and the girl stayed.

Chapter I

*"Where ivy clung and wopses stung,
Where bees hummed and drummed and strummed,
Where trees grew and breezes blew —"*

W. S. GILBERT.

KAVANAGH, a recently built and somewhat exclusive residential section of Westchester County, prided itself on the worth of its householders aside from their financial rating.

This attitude, while justified in the main, was not entirely impregnable. Nor could it be, for while a man's income may be fairly accurately discovered, it is not so easy to size up his moral virtues and their contrary vices.

However, the pleasant avenues and delightful homes of Kavanagh seemed to indicate the blamelessness of the outside of the cup and platter, whatever ravening wolves might lurk inside.

One of the most attractive places was "The Oriels," whose low, privet hedge permitted passers-by to see the massed, informal flower gardens and the long, low house.

Built of stone, nearly covered with ampelopsis, the house was charming, and boasted a great lounge which occupied a goodly portion of the first floor, and combined beauty and harmony of furnishings with real comfort. At one end of the long room was a sun-parlor and a terrace; at the other end the

house widened and accommodated the dining-room and domestic offices.

The place took its name from three large oriel windows that graced the lounge. These, resting on heavy brackets, and showing diamond-paned casements, were in harmony with the architecture and were as comfortable inside the house as they were beautiful outside.

On a dark afternoon in January, and January afternoons can be very dark, Irma Steele half stood, half knelt in one of the oriels. One knee on the cushioned window-seat, she leaned against the window frame and gazed out into the gathering dusk.

A soft, indirect light rayed behind her, touching her pale hair with a silvery gleam, and outlining her slender, graceful figure against the old blue draperies. Idly she looked through the tiny panes: her home, her gardens, her car coming up the drive, and now, her husband getting out of it.

Without moving, she stayed as she was till he came into the room.

"Perfect, my dear," he said; "a veritable Burne Jones. Your long, lithe body and graceful swan neck are his model to a dot."

"Am I such a back number?" she laughed. "As out-of-date as all that?"

"A great artist can never be out-of-date. Nor can you, my dear. Anybody coming?"

"Oh, yes, a few. The crowd that usually drops in on Sunday afternoons. You stay around?"

"Yes, if you like."

Irma had turned back to the window again, had even resumed her previous position.

"For whom are you posing now?" asked Wyatt Steele. "Stanhope, I suppose."

"No, for those two youngsters just coming in. They're always early."

Colvin Kane and Patricia Raymond, younger generation, came bounding in.

"Ha, Evangeline!" cried Kane. "'He cometh not,' she said!"

"Nothing of the sort," declared Pat. "It's 'Oh, Mary, call the cattle home, across the sands o' Dee.' Gosh, Irma, you're a picture whatever you do. You just live, a picture."

Irma Steele laughed, dropped her pose and turned back into the room.

Her husband looked at her curiously.

"Keyed up to-night, aren't you, Irma?" he said, with a disagreeable smile.

"No, no more than always," but the nervously twisting fingers and the tapping foot belied her words.

"I say, Irma, have you met that Mrs. Merse-reau?" chirped Patricia. "She's staying at the Inn."

"Yes, I've met her. She said she'd drop in this afternoon."

"How scrumptious! I'm crazy to see her. They say she's queer!"

"Who isn't?" asked Kane. "Got to be queer nowadays, or go under."

"Then I'll have to go under," Irma smiled, "for I'm not queer."

"You're the queerest of the lot," her husband told her, but no word did she say in retort. Nor did she give him a glance. Her eyes, calm and steady, rested on the pert and pretty face of the girl, Patricia, and she spoke to her.

"Austin Fenn is coming, too. You like him, Pat, don't you?"

"Yes, except that he makes me feel young and a trifle crude. He's so frightfully clever."

"Well, you are young and a trifle crude," Irma gave her a smile that took all sting from the words. "And Austin Fenn is just about the cleverest man I know."

"I subscribe to that," said an entering voice, and Serena Tenney came slowly along the length of the room.

"You walk like a queen," said Patricia, staring at her. "I mean, like a queen ought to walk. I've seen two queens, and they didn't walk queenly, but you do."

She was right. Serena Tenney, middle-aged, white-haired, decidedly plump, had a carriage and bearing a duchess might have envied. More, she had a triumphant air of success, justified because she had earned it for herself, by her own determination and perseverance.

She was a power in Kavanagh, and she was an intimate friend of Irma Steele. Unkind gossip said that Mrs. Steele had paid her well to undertake

the launching and navigation of the Steele ship of state and Serena had earned her salary. Be that as it might, the two women were good chums and Irma greeted the visitor warmly.

Wyatt Steele gave her a curt nod, which was as much as he usually vouchsafed to most of his wife's guests.

Mrs. Tenney, modishly gowned and perfectly groomed, selected the most comfortable chair she could see and established herself therein.

"No place like 'The Oriels' on a Sunday afternoon," she announced. "Though why that name I don't know. Why not 'The Bay Windows'? That's all they are."

"Nonsense," rejoined Steele. "Oriels are held up by brackets; bay windows go right down to the foundations."

"So much the better," said Serena; "gives you more room in the cellar."

"Which we don't need," laughed Irma. "We've lots of unused rooms in the cellar."

"You might have a squash court down there, or a swimming pool," suggested Patricia. "Why don't you?"

"Don't suggest any more building!" exclaimed Steele, rather crossly. "Irma has spent money like water on the place already."

"Well, it's her place," spoke up Serena, with spirit. "Why shouldn't she?"

"I'd like to do something with the cellar," Irma

said, not looking at her husband. "It might exorcise the spooks."

"Ooh!" squealed Patricia, "are they there yet? What are they doing now?"

"Don't be silly!" Steele told the girl; "and don't humor Irma's imagination. She's foolish enough on the subject already."

"But I do hear things at night," Irma said, her great gray eyes growing wider.

She was sitting on the window-seat now, her powder-blue gown lovely against the darker blue of the curtains. Her exquisite, pale face with its chiseled beauty was serene and calm, but her great eyes, wide apart beneath their straight, even brows, seemed to dilate with fear, almost horror, as she spoke.

Then more guests came, and the subject was dropped.

Lily Mersereau came—the one they called queer—but her appearance indicated only a picturesque sort of woman, whose taste was slightly bizarre.

She was gowned in black, but a profusion of "costume jewelry" in coral coloring took off all somberness. Not only necklace, earrings and bracelets, but a long, dangling, girdle arrangement gave a barbaric effect, and coral-red shoes completed the picture.

She spoke in a low, well-bred voice, yet gave the impression that she was watching her step, as if afraid she would mispronounce a word, or fail to say "not at all" distinctly.

"Isn't she priceless?" whispered Pat to Colly Kane. "I bet she'll soon say, 'Oh, pardon I!' And I know she crooks her little finger when she drinks tea."

"She's a looker!" was all Kane replied.

And so she was. Dark hair and eyes, languorous, graceful form, with slow, sinuous movements, she glided, rather than stepped, and sank down beside her hostess on the window-seat with a caressing air of intimacy.

Unconsciously, Irma drew away a little, her own straightforwardness resenting this pseudo-comradeship. Instinctively she disliked the woman, and then, moved by her own sense of justice, she proceeded to be extra nice to her by way of compensation.

Lily Mersereau, who was a bundle of intuition, sensed all this, and sweetly met Irma half way, so that the result was extreme friendliness.

Then Austin Fenn came, clever-looking, reserved, and with the appearance of being a trifle shy, though those who knew him well said that this assumed shyness was his bulwark of defense against being bored.

Though only about thirty, his hair was considerably grayed and his blue eyes had drooping lids that gave him the effect of a world-weary being, who yearned but for rest and peace. Yet this didn't prevent his having hosts of admirers, attracted by his very indifference and taciturnity.

Irma wasn't quite sure whether she liked the man

or not. He was more or less of a mystery to her, and mysteries always annoyed her.

Followed Mark Stanhope, who was not at all mysterious, and whom she was sure she liked—a big, well-set-up chap, with sunny, tumbling hair, kindly brown eyes and a smiling mouth above a firm, well-shaped chin.

He strode across the room, and shook Irma's hand vigorously, with a hearty, "How are you, Mrs. Steele, and how's the kiddie?"

"I'm fine, Mark," Irma said, "and Pansy Ann is all right. She hasn't forgotten the horse and cart you sent her. She draws it around all the time."

"A lovely baby," Stanhope declared; "dunno when I've seen a child that so appealed to me."

"Yes, she's a darling," and Irma gave a little sigh.

"Your baby?" queried Lily Mersereau. "Pansy Ann? What a quaint name!"

"Don't laugh at it," smiled Irma. "I had to name her for two aunts, and it's not uneuphonious, whatever else it may be."

"I think it's a corking name," said Stanhope.

"You'd think so if it were *Jemima Abigail*," Patricia whispered to him, and he colored, though he obstinately shook his mop of unruly hair.

Others came then: Rita Delano, sweet and graceful; Betty Pierce, a bit *gauche*, but talented in lots of ways; Ray Booth, an important-looking man of about forty; Tom Thorpe, a scamp and cut-up; and others, who came and went, for Irma's Sunday after-

noons were attractive, and most of the Kavanagh people loved to drop in if only for a few moments.

Through a great arch at one end of the long room, and crossing a hall, guests reached the dining-room, where a pleasant tea was in progress.

Supervised by Wicks, the capable butler, trim maids flitted about, and if the younger generation, or their elders, for that matter, preferred a cocktail party to a tea, it was at their disposal.

Serena Tenney pursued her queenly walk around the rooms, joining one group and then another, dropping a judicious word or hint here and there—in fact, earning the money that Irma paid her to keep the party in the right key. And like a majordomo in a street parade, Serena kept everything in time and tune, and without the least effect of doing anything of the sort.

A wonderful woman was Serena—the very embodiment of efficiency and generalship. With sharp eyesight, acute hearing, marvelous intuition and an unusual allowance of common sense, she couldn't fail to pick up an enormous amount of gossip, both true and false, as she went her rounds.

"Oh," she heard Lily Mersereau say, "then it isn't Mr. Steele's child?"

"No," returned her companion. "She has only been married to Mr. Steele three months or so. She was a Mrs. Darcy, and she lived here in this house. It's her house. The little girl is about two, I think. Her name is Pansy Ann Darcy. Did you ever hear such a ridiculous name?"

"Cute, though, isn't it?" said Serena, pausing by the speakers. "You see, Mrs. Steele had two well-beloved aunts, and they both made her promise to name her first girl child after them. So she kept her promise."

"It's rather a pretty name once you get used to it," smiled Mrs. Mersereau. "I like it better every minute!"

Serena smiled and walked on, looking and listening, with the air of doing neither.

"All alone, Mr. Fenn?" she said, dropping into a seat beside the clever one. "Why the exclusiveness?"

"Waiting for you," he said, drawlingly, but with a flash of his blue eyes that betokened interest. "Most people are such bores."

"I'm not," declared Serena. "My worst enemy can't call me a bore."

"I shall, if you don't talk about what I want to talk about."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Irma Steele."

"What about her?"

"Is she in love with her husband?"

"How can I tell?"

"You mean you won't tell me. But you don't have to. I know. She isn't."

"Then why are you asking me?"

"For corroboration. What did she marry him for?"

"Lord, man, I don't know! There may be a

dozen reasons. Perhaps she wanted a lord of the manor, or a step-father for her child, or more money than she has of her own, or a—a dancing partner—there are any number of just causes for marriage. Why don't you get married yourself?"

"Don't try to change the subject; I won't have it. None of the reasons you mentioned is the real one."

"Isn't it?" Serena looked innocently ignorant.

"No. But I can't think what the real reason was ——"

"Do you have to?"

"Yes, for my own satisfaction. You see, she is in love with Mark Stanhope."

"Really? Well, now, how can I help you? Do you want me to go and ask her about it?"

"No. You're a darling, Mrs. Tenney, and I adore you, but you can't fool me. You know all about Mrs. Steele's affairs, but if you don't choose to divulge them, I can't make you do so."

"True enough. Some women you might, but not me—not Serena Tenney."

"No, not Serena Tenney. So you admit you know?"

"I admit nothing. And I think you're intrusive, impertinent and impudent. But I don't get angry at you, because the matter isn't worth it. Mrs. Steele's affairs are nothing to you or to me. Indeed, they're not great affairs, anyhow. I mean, she is a sweet, gracious woman, but not an intriguing sort or a woman of secrets."

"And if I say I don't agree to that ——?"

"I reply that you don't know what you're talking about."

Again the blue eyes flashed at her a glance of such receptive understanding, such sly knowledge, that Serena wriggled a little—only in her mind, however; outwardly her calm was undisturbed, her poise unruffled.

Many people were leaving now, and she rose to go and stand beside Irma, as she said her gracious good-byes. A backward glance at Fenn gave her more food for thought, for the man was openly smiling at her.

She put it all out of her mind for the present, a thing to take up later, and joined Irma where she stood in one of the oriels.

Many went away, with handshakings and polite words, all of which Serena weighed up and balanced carefully in her methodical and well-ordered mind.

"We're not going," announced Patricia, with a shake of her curled head.

"No?" said Irma, smiling her amusement. "Why not?"

"We're going to stay to supper. Quite a lot of us. Me and Colly and Lily Mersereau and Mr. Fenn and Mr. Booth and Mrs. Delano and Aunt Serena—oh, and Mark."

"No," said Irma, "you can't stay to supper to-night."

Chapter II

*"At a pleasant evening party I had taken down to supper
One whom we will call Elvira, and we talked of love and
Tupper."*

W. S. GILBERT.

"I DIDN'T ask you could we, I said we are," Pat cooed, possessing herself of Irma's hand, and nodding her curly head. "Now I must see if I've left out anybody I really want."

"But Pat, wait a minute," Irma admonished, trying to speak sternly, "I can't have a lot of people to supper, for I've given the whole staff the evening off, except Jenny, who will look after Wyatt and me. But we can't have a crowd."

"That's all you know about it!" and Pat smiled triumphantly. "It's all fixed up. Mrs. Mersereau will make a salad—the pantry is full of things to make it out of—and Rita Delano is going to make a Spanish omelet—you know, all chili con carne and hot tamales and everything! And I'm going to superintend, and somebody will make coffee, and—oh, yes, we thought Mr. Steele would shake up a cocktail—— How about it?"

The girl looked saucily at Steele, and Irma fully expected he would retort angrily, or, at least, snub her.

But, surprisingly enough, Wyatt Steele smiled

benignly and said, "I'm delighted to help. Call on me for anything I can do."

"Now, you see!" exclaimed Pat, and, dropping a butterfly kiss on Irma's shining hair, she danced away to spread the good news.

Steele looked after her, smiled, and then turned to glance at his wife. He had agreed to the girl's plan for the amiable reason that he thought it would annoy Irma, and he was a bit disappointed to see her give no sign of being displeased.

Wyatt Steele was one of the foremost citizens of Kavanagh. A prominent lawyer, with offices in New York, he was exceeding wise, and, moreover, canny. Good-looking, in a large florid way, he was very bald, which gave him the effect of being older than his thirty-five years.

When Irma Darcy first came to Kavanagh, the previous spring, she had put her financial affairs in Steele's hands and had been guided by his advice. Now they were man and wife, and after three months of married life, had discovered their entire unsuitedness to one another.

Irma could scarcely be blamed, for she had told him distinctly that she did not love him, but he had urged the marriage with the argument that he would make her love him, sooner or later, which promise, however, he had been unable to keep.

Nor was it greatly Steele's fault. A masterful, determined man, he had felt sure he could bend this woman to his will, not reckoning on her own inflexible strength of character. All his life he had boasted

that when he chose to marry, his wife should be entirely what he willed to make her.

A more pliable nature might have fallen in with his scheme of things, but Irma was far from pliable. Disagreement annoyed her, opposition roused her anger, and interference with her plans she could not brook. Also, her child was not kindly looked upon by Steele. The two-year-old baby was a lovely little girl, winsome and happy-natured, but Steele disliked children and grew ill-tempered whenever Pansy Ann was present. As a result, Irma spent many hours in the nursery or outdoors with her daughter, and Steele was left to amuse himself.

Gossiping neighbors never felt quite sure why these two had married at all. Diverse in tastes and interests, they had, of late, drifted farther and farther apart, until a definite break seemed imminent.

Steele missed no opportunity to annoy or irritate his wife, and so, this Sunday afternoon, he made the supper party welcome solely because he knew it would bother her. Too wise to show her disapproval, Irma accepted the situation and smiled after Patricia as she disappeared toward the dining-room.

"You'll stay, Serena," she said, and Mrs. Tenney nodded assent.

So the other guests departed, and Patricia's crowd numbered ten.

"Just a few of us, Irma," the girl eased it over; "I knew you wouldn't have food enough for a whole

lot of folks. Now, you just let your henchmen clear away the tea business, and we'll get the supper ourselves."

"All right, Pat, have your own way. Serena, play hostess, while I go to the nursery for a while. It's Pansy's bedtime and she'll be looking for me."

Irma went off and Serena calmly looked over the bunch corralled by the impetuous Patricia.

Lily Mersereau and Austin Fenn were amusing enough. Rita Delano was all right—sure of herself and her behavior. Mark Stanhope was a dear, if nobody started him quarreling. Ray Booth she knew only slightly, but she had heard him highly praised, and was glad to have the chance of knowing more about him.

A good crowd, and well-balanced. As to food, there were lots of sandwiches and cakes left over from the tea-table, so why worry? Nobody wanted much Sunday night, anyhow, and, if necessary, she herself could turn out a perfect Welsh rabbit.

So Serena settled back to enjoy herself, and, as always happened, the others drifted toward her, sat down near her, and, presently, she was the center of the whole group.

Later on, Irma returned from the nursery, Pat and young Kane reappeared from the pantry, and it was announced that supper would now be prepared.

"And I can make my Spanish omelet!" cried Rita, jumping up. "Oh, I make such good ones—I know you'll all agree!"

"And I'll mix the salad," Lily Mersereau declared. "You know it needs 'a madcap to mix all together,' and that's what I am!"

"The last term I should think of applying to you," said Fenn, as he accompanied her toward the dining-room. "Witch, siren, sorceress, yes—but not madcap."

"You know we call ourselves not what we are but what we want to be," and Lily Mersereau gave him a sideward glance.

"Oh, well, if you want to be a madcap, I'm sure you can be, but other rôles are far more interesting."

"Now, Mr. Steele, shake up your cocktails," Rita adjured him. "Let me help you; I'm good at it."

Serena looked at her.

Rita Delano had come to Kavanagh since the Steeles were married, and as she had never met either of them before her advent there, she seemed a bit on the friendly side with Wyatt Steele.

Serena Tenney took this in, and chuckled to herself as Steele ignored the offer of help, and attended to the matter himself.

"Didn't get much small change out of Wy," thought the astute Serena, and then she turned to see how Irma took it. But Irma was paying no attention, being busy getting some table appointments from the sideboard drawers.

"Jenny set the table," she said, gayly, "and I'll give you some extra silver and napkins, but for the rest you must picnic it."

"Just what we want to do," chimed in Pat.

"Don't bother, Irma, darling—leave all to me. Serena Tenney, what are you going to do for the common cause?"

"I have a Charlotte complex," was the reply. "I think, like a well-conducted person, I'll go on cutting bread and butter."

"Bully for you! I love bread and butter. Here's the material—cut it thin, now."

Pat whisked a table up to Serena and brought bread and butter, a sharp knife and plates, and preparations went rapidly and skillfully forward.

There was only Jenny to wait on them, but she was an efficient sort, and more than willing to do all she could to help along.

Serena, cutting bread and butter, found ample leisure to glance about her and size up the situation.

She sensed a tenseness that she couldn't quite understand, and with Serena Tenney, not to understand meant immediate investigation.

She studied each one, and came quickly to the conclusion that there was trouble brewing between the two Steeles.

Such a pity, and they married only three months! Complete disillusion on both sides, probably. Well, they ought to have known better than to marry. They were not really young; Irma, she had heard, was twenty-eight. And she had been married before—why did she pick up with Steele so expeditiously?

And Steele—surely he must have known that with his inflexible, inexorable will, he never could be happy with a woman also of strong character.

He should have chosen a clinging-vine sort, a patient Griselda, or meek Priscilla.

And Irma was of finer clay. Wyatt Steele was all right—a man's man—but he had none of the high ideals and æsthetic tastes that Irma loved. Nor had he a pleasant disposition. Kindliness would have gone far to make up for incompatibility, but the lack of both must be disastrous.

And then, there was Mark Stanhope.

Serena had never noticed it before, but surely Mark was adoring Irma. Several times she had caught him gazing as if spellbound at the back of Irma's head, or at her profile, and, once, straight into her eyes, whereupon Irma had turned quickly away.

Oh, Mrs. Serena Tenney didn't miss much when it came to sitting up and taking notice! That, then, was the trouble. But there was more—some other influence at work somewhere.

Austin Fenn? No, hardly. She remembered the impertinence of his conversation with her about Irma, but she valued it all lightly. He had an idle curiosity, that was all. If he had been really or deeply interested, he never would have asked about her. He was a man of the world; his business was connected in some way with moving pictures, so she supposed he looked at everything with a sense of its potential drama. Anyway, he had no intimate acquaintance with Irma, and so, no interest for her.

Ray Booth? He was a little humdrum. Important, yes, but largely on his own showing. He talked

and acted like an important man, and, as such people do, he more or less put it over. He was a financier of some sort, and just now he seemed mildly interested in Lily Mersereau. He was helping her with the salad dressing, but from what she gathered, he knew nothing about it and was more hindrance than aid.

Mrs. Mersereau was in fine form. She coquetted with Booth, at the same time making eyes at Austin Fenn. And then, the cocktails being ready and being served, she declared her salad finished, and announced that its accomplishment entitled her to a seat next her host.

None disputing this, she took the chair at Steele's right, and paid no attention to Irma's remark that that place was meant for Mrs. Tenney.

Serena didn't care, and they all sat down where they pleased, this plan naturally resulting in Mark Stanhope's corralling the chair next Irma. Colvin Kane sat at her other side, saying he must be there to help wait on her should she want anything from the pantry.

The quality and quantity of the cocktails had the effect of relieving the tenseness that Serena had noticed, and the chatter was gay and desultory. But during a slight lull, Irma was heard to say to Mark Stanhope:

"No, I am not mistaken. I told Wyatt about it."

"Out with it, Irma," cried Pat, gayly. "What did you tell Wyatt about? I love family squabbles! Tell us all."

"Oh, nothing," said Irma, flushing under the curious glances. "Hush up, Pat; forget it."

"Not I," and Pat shook a chiding forefinger. "Come, now, you've got to tell us!"

"Then I won't," said Irma, calmly. "I never do anything I've got to do."

"I'll tell," said Wyatt Steele, easily. "It makes it unduly important to be mysterious about it. What Irma told me was merely that she had heard spooks in the house."

A shout of laughter went up at this, and Austin Fenn said, "Now we must have the story. You tell it, Mrs. Steele."

"No," Irma smiled; "let Wyatt tell it. He'll make it sound better than I could."

"Meaning I'll embellish it," Steele said. "Meaning I can't tell the simple truth."

"Oh, I'll tell it if you like," Irma put in, hoping to ward off a scene.

"No, I'll tell it. Well, you see, my wife is tired of this place, tired of living here—with me—so, she is trying in every way possible to find some reason to get out of this house."

"This beautiful house!" cried Lily, with a glance full of poignant reproach at Irma. "How can you want to leave it?"

"I didn't say I wanted to leave it," returned Irma, in a firm, clear voice; "I love the place, but ——"

"I'm telling the story, my dear," said Steele, a little sharply. "Well, it goes without saying that if

there are spooks—real spooks, you know, in a house—a nervous woman can't stay in it. So Irma has set up a mess of spooks and, according to her tale, they're a fine set of the most modern, up-to-date, present-year model spooks ever met with."

"Have they been met with?" asked Rita Delano, smiling.

"Not visibly," Steele told her. "But my wife has heard them—oh, yes, she has thoroughly heard them!"

"I certainly have," and now Irma's tone was a little defiant, and a slight flush showed on her cheeks. "Along toward morning, about four o'clock, they wail like lost souls ——"

"Oh, now, Irma," and Serena tried to cut off the fairy tale, "you know better ——"

"All right, then! What was it? What did I hear that sounded like the last desperate wail of a dying martyr?"

"The siren of a passing motor-car," said Booth, who was a practical sort.

"My hearing is very acute. I should know the siren of a car at once."

"Some wounded animal in the woods," suggested Stanhope.

"The woods are too far away," Irma spoke to him more gently; "and, too, I know the animals' cries. They are not at all like lost souls."

"Well, say it was a lost soul," put in Serena, "what is your explanation? What is a lost soul doing poking around your house at night?"

"Giving warning," said Irma, solemnly.

"Oh, going to leave! You ought to be glad."

"Don't be silly, Serena, I heard what I heard. I am not foolishly superstitious, but—oh, I can't tell you the whole story—at least, not now. Do change the subject."

"We will," said Patricia, throwing herself into the breach. "Listen, everybody, and I'll tell you a poem I just heard. It seems it was composed by an old Oxford professor, and I think it is darling.

'Charles gave Elizabeth a Dodo;

Charles never offered one to me!

The loveliest lemon-colored Dodo,

With the greenest eyes that you would wish to see;

Now, it isn't that I'm doubting if Charles loves me,

And I *know* that he would ask me out to tea;

But—he *did* give Elizabeth a Dodo,

And he never—even—offered—one—to—me!"

Isn't that perfect?"

"It's a gem!" declared Lily. "I know just how that poor soul felt! And that perfidious Charles! Oh, a monster!"

"Yes, indeed," cried Irma, who had recovered her poise; "to give that hussy, Elizabeth, a Dodo, and then, *then*—go to his real girl and—ask her out to tea!"

"And the poor thing, not doubting that he loves her!" This from Serena. "Some women are so gullible."

"Yes, aren't they?" agreed Irma. "But a Dodo! Why, that girl would have been justified in murdering Charles!"

"Ah, yes," assented Booth, "*a crime passionel*. But yes, surely sufficient provocation!"

All had been said in bantering tones, but now Wyatt Steele spoke in a strained, serious voice: "And you would murder for such an affront, Irma?"

She caught the underlying taunt, but quickly determined that a chaffing retort would be best.

"Oh, yes, Wy. If ever you present a lady with a Dodo, expect your food to be poisoned soon after!"

Lily Mersereau dropped her fork with a little scared squeal; Rita gazed at her hostess in horrified amazement, as if wondering whether she could have heard aright; Serena looked down at her plate, trusting to get all the reactions through her ears, and Patricia Raymond just stared at Irma, as if thinking her suddenly gone mad.

The men all took it more lightly, and casually lighted cigarettes, or smiled politely.

Mark Stanhope tried to save the situation.

"Quite right, too, Mrs. Steele. But Steele wouldn't do it. Why, a Dodo is a most horrible wild fowl! And extinct, besides. Where could one get one? Look here, Pat, is your Dodo story true? And where did Charles get one?"

"Oh, I dunno. Say, I know a worse 'pome' than that! Want me to tell it?"

"We do not!" said Stanhope, sternly. "When a

girl of your type knows a worse story, it's high time to stop telling stories and play pingpong."

"Let's have a rubber of bridge," said Austin Fenn, when supper was over. "Sit in, Steele?"

"Yes—all men," said Steele, who was a good player, and hated to play with women.

But Stanhope wouldn't play, and Colly Kane was not deemed worthy, so they took Serena for the fourth, she playing a better game than most men could boast.

The quartet became absorbed in their cards; Pat and Colly Kane excused themselves and went on to some younger gathering. Stanhope and Irma tried to be polite and gracious to the two remaining guests, but it was up-hill work, and presently Mrs. Mersereau said she must be going and Rita Delano concluded to go too.

"Bless them!" cried Stanhope, fervently. "I could have kissed them both for going and giving me a few moments with you! I suppose I'd better go, too, or you'll be in for a curtain lecture. Too bad Steele is such a dog in the manger. What harm for me to stay here a bit and worship you silently?"

"Don't talk like that. I want you for my friend, and if you ——"

"All right, I won't. I want to be your friend."

"Then, if you really want to be my friend, you'll have to go now. If Wyatt knew we were here alone together, he'd ——"

"Go on, what would he do?"

"Well, he'd lose his temper, and then he might do anything—anything at all."

"Yes, I s'pose so. But he's tied to the bridge table for an hour or so."

"But he'll pop out here, if he thinks—oh, if he thinks anything."

"Let's hope he won't think anything, then. I must look at you a few minutes longer—in that wonderful blue ——"

"Powder blue."

"Well, whatever it is, it makes you just angelic—a della Robbia angel."

"Nonsense. You mean Fra Angelico. And I wish you'd go."

"Going, Lady. Just going. May I wish you a good night?"

He bent low over her hand, and then stood very erect and soldierly of attitude.

"If you should need my services in any way, command me," and with a quick bow, he was gone.

Irma sat where he had left her, thinking, wondering. Life was so hard, so puzzling, what should she do? What could she do?

There was no answer to her self-questioning, and unheeding the flight of time, she sat silent until the card players, through their game, came toward her.

"Susquehanna! Change for West Honolulu!" cried Fenn, who was waggish at times.

"I haven't been asleep," said Irma, smiling at them, in utmost good nature. "Who won?"

"I did, of course," answered Serena. "These Lords of Creation think women can't play Contract. They'll never learn that we're a match for them at cards—as well as a few other things."

"I admit it," Booth said. "You put up a magnificent game, Mrs. Tenney. I enjoyed playing with you."

"Come again some night soon, Mr. Booth," invited Irma. "And we'll have a couple of tables and you can select your quartet."

Booth accepted with thanks, and after a little more talk the guests left and husband and wife were alone.

"How late did the people out here stay?"

"Not long. The youngsters went directly after supper, and the others a short time later."

"Did Stanhope stay after the women went?"

"A few moments," said Irma, disdaining to lie.

"Then you had a few moments of Elysium to pay for the boresome afternoon."

"Yes," Irma looked him straight in the eye. "Elysium is not the right word, but I enjoyed talking to Mr. Stanhope. He is always entertaining."

"Very well, now sit down and be entertaining to me."

And Irma did. Hard as it was to be entertaining to order, she accomplished it and chatted away in a cheery vein, with no apparent embarrassment or self-consciousness.

"You're a good sort," said Steele, impulsively.

"Sometimes I'm afraid I don't appreciate you. So you don't want me to give Elizabeth a Dodo?"

"No," said Irma, smiling at the recollection of the foolish verse.

"Then I won't," said Steele.

Chapter III

*"Is life a boon?
If so, it must befall
That Death, whene'er he call,
Must call too soon."*

W. S. GILBERT.

"How she can stand him, I can't ermagine! Some day she'll kill him! If I'd married old Steele, I'd left him or murdered him within a week!"

"Now, Netta, hush your nonsense," admonished Mrs. Leith, housekeeper at "The Oriels" to Netta, Irma's own maid.

It was nearing two o'clock, and the servants, returned from their evening out, had all gone to bed, save the housekeeper, who waited up for the maid.

"'Tain't nonsense," Netta stormed on. "They been quar'ling something fierce. Seems Mr. Steele, he gave some woman a doodad of some sort, and she can't get over it. Lord, if she knew all the things he gives women!"

"Netta, be quiet! Stop that talk and go to bed!"

"All right, I will, but if you knew all they said ——"

"I don't want to know and you're to forget it. Mind that, now. You're getting altogether too independent and uppish, and unless you mind your step, you'll find yourself outside, looking in!"

"Not me! I know too much. Well, good night, Mother Leith. I'm dead tired. Danced till one o'clock, and then to come home and listen to two people in tantarums for another hour! It's exhausting, that's what it is!"

And then darkness and silence settled down on "The Oriels," and the long, low, beautiful house lay lighted only by the faint glimmer of a moon in its last wan quarter.

Irma lay awake, staring out through the open oriel that faced the foot of her bed. The cold night wind blew in, but she liked that, and was used to it.

Steele, on the contrary, liked a warm room to sleep in, and the door from her room into his was closed. On the other side of her were her boudoir and dressing-rooms, the communicating door also closed.

Restless and unquiet, a prey to disturbing thoughts, Irma tossed and fidgeted in an effort to sleep, but only became more and more wide awake.

And then, she saw what she had dreaded, had feared she would see—a faint, tremulous light, that feebly flickered across the ceiling.

She tried to make herself believe it was merely imagination, induced by her long, weary vigil of wakefulness. But there was no mistake. The pale illumination, irregular in shape and uncertain of size, moved slowly across the ceiling and back again. Then it disappeared, and after a few moments she thought she heard faint strains of music—low, yet piercingly sweet—no real tune, but

merely a soft wail that seemed to permeate the whole room, yet, after all, was scarcely audible.

She wondered if Wyatt could hear it in his room. She thought of stepping in there and asking him, but she knew if she waked him from sleep, she would be subjected to a tirade of sarcastic reproach, and made to feel that she was guilty of a deadly sin. Wyatt Steele brooked no interruption of the even tenor of his way, whether awake or asleep.

The music died away in a mere ghost of a strain, and, as it ceased, Irma wondered whether she had not imagined it. But she knew she had not, and the eerie, frightened feeling it gave her was overcome by an unbounded curiosity to know the explanation of the phenomenon. She determined to search the house. Surely, such a musician, if hidden anywhere, could not be a dangerous foe. And she must know whether there was a practical explanation, or whether—she bravely put it into words—whether she was going mad.

So, in slippers and kimono, she went silently down the stairs to the lounge, and tried to explore by the dim moonlight. She dared not make a light, lest she waken her husband or the servants.

But, as her eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, she could see well enough, and she satisfied herself that there was no one in the house that didn't belong there. She went to the kitchens, even down to the cellar, but, unless the intruder was carefully hidden, he didn't exist. She felt no fear,

for an evil-minded burglar doesn't announce his presence by sweet music.

There were then, only two possible explanations: either she was losing her mental balance, or there was some truth in supernaturalism. Yet her mind denied both these possibilities, and she softly returned to her room to think it out.

Closing the hall door, she turned on the lights, and scanned the wall and ceiling where she had seen the strange glow. She could see nothing out of place or unusual. The pale rose brocade of the wall hangings, the delicate painted tracery of the ceiling showed no spot nor mar that could indicate a tampering hand.

She leaned far out the oriel window, but could see no way that an intruder could climb the straight stone walls of the house. A human fly might, she decided, but no human being had appeared at that window while she lay in bed. It was in her view all the time, and, anyway, if some musical genius had brought a ladder, and serenaded her, it would have been heard by Wyatt, or surely by some of the servants who slept on that side of the house.

Surprised at herself that she felt so little real alarm, merely a vague curiosity, Irma went back to bed and tried once again to compose herself to sleep.

She smiled to herself at a sudden recollection of Colvin Kane's name for the mysterious sounds. She had heard them twice before, and had told several people about them. From her description, Kane had

gathered there was a wailing, sibilant sound, and he had declared it was the work of a well-known "Haunt" called "The Whoosh."

The name had delighted Patricia, and the two youngsters spoke of it as an accepted member of the family, asking after the health of "The Whoosh" whenever occasion offered. Irma had laughed, too, but after this night's experience, she didn't see the humorous side so clearly.

She had been told "The Oriels" was haunted, but had merely laughed at the idea, as one does at such suggestions. She had mentioned it to Steele, and he had fairly snorted with disgust to think she could give it enough credence to refer to it at all. Yet she hoped, some time, to prove to him that the light could be seen, the music could be heard. Not to-night, though. He was in no mood to be bothered. And then, shortly after the hall clock had chimed four, she heard deep moans and groans from her husband's room.

Again, she slipped into mules and kimono, and went to his bedside.

She found him writhing in pain. Unable or unwilling to speak, he continued to howl in agony, raising his voice into shrieks as the paroxysms increased.

"Water, water!" he cried, at last, and Irma, who had a glassful ready, offered it to him. He drank it greedily, and called for more.

"I'm burning up inside!" he groaned. "My mouth tastes like an ash-can and I'm nearly dead with

gripes! Can't you do something? Don't just stand there, looking like a dying calf!"

"Shall I call Doctor Campbell?"

"Call anybody that can help me. Get Gregg down here, if he'll condescend to come."

Irma went to the door that opened into the servants' portion of the house, and called Gregg. This was Steele's valet, but such a pompous and supercilious person was he that neither master nor mistress troubled him if they could help it. Steele continually threatened to make a change, but Gregg was so skillful and clever at his work that they kept him on.

After a somewhat long delay, he appeared in correct attire, and inquired what he could do.

"Go and take care of Mr. Steele," Irma told him. "He is very ill. Probably something he ate or drank for supper. See if you think it necessary to call Doctor Campbell."

"Yes, madam," Gregg said, a moment later, "I advise the doctor and at once. And I want more help. May I call Charles and Mrs. Leith?"

"I'll call them," Irma said, "and I'll telephone the doctor. It's—it's indigestion, isn't it, Gregg?"

"I cannot say, madam. Perhaps so."

Soon the house was bustling with people. Mrs. Leith called Netta, who unwillingly dressed herself to attend upon her mistress. The butler and two footmen joined the force, for it began to be noised about that the master was very ill indeed.

"Maybe, and maybe not," said Wicks, the butler,

to this. "I've known him to set up a yowling if he stubbed his toe. But we'd better be ready. Doctor Campbell will want a cup of coffee after he gets through, and we could all do with some breakfast."

"A fine time to kick up this bobbery," said Netta, peevishly. "I was near dead after the dance, then I had to do for madam, and now, up again for the old curmudging! Rotten business!"

"Hush your noise," said Mrs. Leith, severely. "Get up to your place, and be ready to do for Mrs. Steele."

"All right, all right," Netta sung out. "I will. I'll put out her new negglejay of transparent velvet, so she can vamp the doctor."

The maid took herself off to the boudoir, where she awaited orders.

"Give me some clothes," directed Irma, entering. "That velvet housegown will do."

"Oh, will it?" thought Netta; "I am so surprised!"

The lovely robe of pale jade green suited the fair-haired wearer, and though Steele's groans could still be heard, Irma did not return to his room, but went downstairs to await the doctor.

He soon came, and the anxious-looking wife told him of her husband's painful illness.

"Oho, a late supper, with messy salads and omelets! What could he expect but to have the collywobbles?"

Doctor Campbell, a young, active chap, sprang

up the stairs two at a time and made for Steele's room.

But even at first glance, his face grew grave, and he drew up a chair and began an examination. He worked quickly, asked a few questions, administered a few remedies and then, having quieted the patient by some means best known to himself, he gave Gregg some instructions and went downstairs to Irma.

"Is he all right now?" she asked.

"No, he is not. He is a very sick man. He has gastro-enteritis, and he may or may not pull through."

"Pull through! Do you mean he may—may ——"

"He may die. Yes. But I hope to save him. You will need a nurse, two nurses, of course. Shall I send one over at once?"

"Yes, of course. Whatever you think best, Doctor Campbell."

So a white-linened nurse soon came, and took charge of the house and all its inmates, except, of course, Gregg, who loftily declined to be under anybody's thumb.

The first skirmish proved his invincibility, and the nurse accepted the situation. Indeed, she had too much to do to bother about anything but her patient. The nature of his illness made necessary her constant care and attention, and if she had a short respite from her work, Steele pettishly demanded small comforts or ministrations that kept her busy.

Now and then, Irma appeared at the door, and offered her help, only to be met with violent protestations of displeasure from the sick man.

"You get out, Irma," he would growl. "You're only a fair-weather wife! In case of trouble, you're no good at all. When pain and anguish wring the brow, you're 'bout as helpful as a cow!"

"Are you suffering, Wy?" she asked, with real sympathy, ignoring his rude jibe.

"Am I suffering! Oh, no! Just experiencing a mix-up of the tortures of the damned and the Spanish Inquisition, that's all! No one ever knew such agony—ooh—ow ——"

The pain-racked man writhed in a spasm of acute distress that wrung dreadful, guttural sounds from his parched and burning throat. Unable to help and feeling she could stand no more, Irma fled downstairs to find Serena Tenney there, also Rita Delano.

"I couldn't keep away," said the latter, taking both Irma's hands in hers. "If you'd rather not see me, I'll run along."

"No, no, stay a few minutes, anyway. Oh, Serena, he is very ill."

"What is it?"

"They don't know exactly. Doctor Campbell said gastro-enteritis, but the nurse says it's more than that. She thinks it's his liver."

"Cirrhosis?"

"No something more acute and sudden. Oh, I don't know what it is. It may be the Curse."

"Hush, hush, child. Mrs. Delano, you talk to Irma a bit. I'm going up to see the patient."

She went off upstairs, and Irma tried to pull herself together.

"I'm sorry to go to pieces so, but he is so ill, and so—impossible ——"

"Yes, yes, dear," said the other, soothingly, "but remember he isn't himself—he is crazed by the pain."

"Yes, that's so," and Irma seemed a little relieved. "I suppose he scarcely knew what he was saying to me."

"No, he didn't. Don't take it to heart. What did you mean by the 'curse'?"

"Oh, that. Why, you see, my—my first husband said if I married again he would put a curse on the man I married and—and also on my child ——"

"Oh, you poor dear," and Rita slipped an arm around the distracted woman. "But surely you don't believe in such nonsense, do you, now?"

"I—I don't know whether I do or not. But—but I am haunted ——"

"Well, forget it for now," Rita smiled at her. "Let all unpleasant subjects alone for the present. Just think what you can do to help your husband ——"

"That's the trouble—I can't do anything. He won't let me."

"Oh, well, that's just a phase of his illness. He'll get over that."

Meantime, Serena was talking to Steele. He

chanced to have a respite from his pain, and was glad to see her.

"Why you look all right, Wyatt," she said, not quite truthfully. "You're as yellow as a lead-pencil, but I suppose your liver is out of order. Doctor Campbell will set that right."

"No, Serena, no. I'm doomed. This is more than mere liver complaint—it's a mortal illness ——"

"Fiddle-de-dee! Trust a man to think he's going to die, if he has a pain in his little finger!"

"Oh, you don't know. I'm in a bad way. And when I go, Irma will be glad of it."

"Don't talk nonsense. Nothing of the sort. If she seems unfeeling, it's because you make her so. You bulldoze her and ballyrag her ——"

"I don't at all! We've only been married three months, and—and I'm terribly disappointed in her."

"Maybe she's disappointed in you."

"I don't see why she should be."

"Why did you two marry?"

Steele looked at her, started to speak, and then closed his mouth tightly. "Ask her," he said. "Let her tell you why we married. My God, I wish I had never seen her! She doesn't like my friends; she doesn't like my ways; she doesn't like to have me around."

"Does she care for anybody else?"

"Does she? I'll say she does! She ——"

"Keep still, the nurse is coming back. Well, I'll leave you now. Rita Delano is downstairs with

Irma. She's a good sort, Rita. Kindly and sort of comforting."

"Like the cocoa. Well, run along, Serena. Come in to see me again, won't you?"

"Of course. Shall I send you some jelly and things?"

"Mercy no, I never expect to eat anything again! Oh, clear out! I'm going to have another spell!"

Serena hastened away, and none too soon, for Steele had a bad paroxysm.

He lay back exhausted, but soon after fell into a natural sleep and peace reigned for a time.

Ray Booth called in the afternoon, and Austin Fenn too. Irma saw them both for she felt glad of any diversion from her anxiety.

She spent much time with her child, and the soft touch of baby hands and the high little voice saying "Pitty Mummy" comforted her as nothing else could.

She felt a trifle ill at ease with Fenn, he was so hard to talk to. But Booth appeared during his call, and helped the situation.

"He'll come through all right," Booth said, cheerily. "I've known cases worse than his, where the illness was only of short duration."

"What is the illness?" asked Fenn.

"Oh, just an upset liver, isn't it, Mrs. Steele?" Booth asked.

"Well, yes, but very badly upset. I suppose he was ill before, and then the supper last night didn't agree with him."

"Is he yellow?" inquired Booth.

"Oh, yes, very."

"Then it may be jaundice. I say, Mrs. Steele, are you satisfied to have only Doctor Campbell? Why don't you call in some one in consultation?"

"Who?" said Irma, doubtfully.

"Oh, anybody reliable. Say, one of those chaps from the hospital."

"Yes, I'd like that. I'd be glad of another point of view. I don't want to leave anything undone. Will you call him?"

Booth looked taken aback.

"Oh, my dear lady, we can't jump at it like that! We must put it up to Doctor Campbell."

"No, I don't want to wait; Doctor Campbell has a consultation in New York this afternoon, and can't come here again until late to-night. Won't you stop at the hospital on your way home and ask some one to come over here?"

"Why, of course, if you authorize it ——"

"I do. And please go at once."

Unwilling to refuse her request, Booth rose and started on his errand. Fenn went along with him, but as Booth made no reference to the matter, the other didn't either. They parted company at the hospital, and Booth went inside.

Of course, he had no difficulty in persuading one of the doctors to go over to "The Oriels," since Doctor Campbell was out of town for the day.

Doctor Loring, a young and very alert chap, un-

dertook the matter and went over to the Steeles' at once.

His diagnosis was that the patient had yellow atrophy of the liver and his life hung in the balance. He gave the nurse instructions, and said that he would return later.

He gave Irma a guarded recital of his findings, and said that his second visit might show conditions more favorable.

"Don't deceive me, Doctor," she said; "don't buoy me up with false hopes. I'd rather know the truth."

"It is uncertain at present," reiterated the young man. "But when I come back this evening I shall know."

As he left, the two youngsters, Pat and Colly Kane, appeared.

"Hello, Irma, darling," cried the girl. "We came over to chirk you up. We're good at it, really we are. And first you're going for a little drive with us. The roads are pretty good, and Colly is a grand driver. We'll only take you for a short run, just to blow the cobwigs out of your brain. Get some furry duds, it's awful cold."

Irma's objections were overruled, and the visitors carried her off for a quick ride through the clear, crisp air.

Netta, having brought wraps and furs, stood watching the car roll away.

"My land!" she thought to herself; "s'pose the old guy dies! Wonder if she'd marry again! Three

husbands is too many for one woman, yet she hasn't had much comfort with Mr. Steele. Incompatterble, that's what they are. No congenitality among 'em. Well, he's always been good enough to me —— Hello, now, what do you want?"

Her remark was addressed to a lank and sorry-looking figure who shuffled along-side. It was a youth named Oscar Percy Mott, and who was generously termed the village half-wit, though he certainly didn't possess a full half of the usual allotment.

"Nothin'," was his reply to Netta's sharp question, whereupon she ordered him off the premises instantler.

The afternoon wore on, Irma came home, the new doctor made a second visit and expressed himself much pleased with the obvious improvement in Mr. Steele's condition.

Doctor Campbell came again, accepted the assistance of a colleague from the hospital, and agreed that the patient was greatly improved.

The night nurse came, the household retired, and silence reigned till about five o'clock in the morning, when a wild shriek sounded and Wyatt Steele was again in the throes of some dread disease. All the symptoms of the previous morning returned in augmented force.

In addition there was an excruciating headache, which culminated in delirium. Then ensued terrible convulsions, and when it seemed that the racked frame could endure no more, in one of these torturing spasms the patient died.

Both doctors had been summoned, and were there at the death scene. Their diagnosis agreed that the disease was yellow atrophy of the liver, and was incurable.

Yet, when Doctor Campbell reached his home after the exhausting experience, he found on his office table a typewritten note which said:

"Beware how you sign a certificate for death from natural causes."

There was no signature.

Chapter IV

*"Though she lived alone, apart,
Hope lay nestling at her heat,
But, alas! the cruel awaking!"*

W. S. GILBERT.

AGAIN the household staff at "The Oriels" were roused before their usual time and great were their protestations.

But Mrs. Leith's word was law, and the whole lot soon appeared in proper uniforms and ready for duty. They were allowed time to swallow a cup of coffee and then dispatched to their several posts.

Netta trudged unwillingly to Irma's dressing-room, and Gregg, with carefully adjusted facial expression, presented himself at the door of his master's bedroom.

He found the door locked, but immediately opened to him by Irma, who, it seemed to him, looked startled and embarrassed rather than sorrowful.

"Oh, it's you, Gregg. Very well, you take charge here. The mortuary people will come after a while. Don't—don't leave Mr. Steele alone. If you are called away, send for Wicks or Mrs. Leith to stay here. Don't send a footman or one of the maids."

"I understand, madam."

The capable servant made no comment on the

death of his master; he held the door open for Irma to pass through and closed it after her.

But though he showed no interest or curiosity, he wondered in his heart why Mrs. Steele talked so fast and so jerkily—seemed, in fact, to be ill at ease and verging on the hysterical.

"Enough to make her, though," he told himself. "Fearful death he must have died, judging from the tossed-up bed, and the lace clear torn off the edge of this pillow! Off his nut, I s'pose. But he never had liver trouble before, that I know of."

Gregg proceeded to straighten up the room, put away things that his master would never use again, and provide fresh linen for the bed.

He opened the windows and let the clear, crisp air in, and then, opening the door to the hall, he awaited further reports or instructions.

Soon Wicks came up to relieve him.

"Go on down and get your breakfast," the butler said; "I've had mine, and you make haste, for I want to get back downstairs. There'll be lots to do to-day and it's Mrs. Steele's orders, nobody shall be in charge up here but you or me."

"All right. I expect they'll be taking him away soon. Sudden, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he must have been ailing for some time."

"Not he! Guess I know. He had a way of grunting over nothing at all, but he wasn't sick a bit!"

"Then what took him off?"

"Acute indigestion, I'd call it. That Sunday night supper, now—they had a lot of messy things, and he

would over-eat. All right, Wicks, carry on. I'll hurry back."

Now Gregg had done only his duty among his master's things, but Wicks was not so scrupulous. Closing the hall door, he hastily turned over the papers on the writing table and also made a swift survey of the contents of several drawers in chiffonier and dresser. Finding a quantity of small bills and loose silver, he took the greater part of it and stuffed it in his pocket, leaving some behind to avert suspicion. He then selected two or three neckties that struck his fancy, and a couple of fine handkerchiefs.

"She'd prob'ly give 'em to me," he ruminated, "but she's none so generous, and I may as well make sure of 'em."

He added a stick-pin to his loot, feeling sure that it would not be missed from the quantity that Steele possessed, and then, his petty pilfering accomplished, he sat down to await the valet's return.

Irma, in her bedroom, had not yet summoned Netta from the dressing-room. The maid was consumed with curiosity to know what her mistress was doing but concluded she was overcome by the situation and was trying to pull herself together.

This was not entirely correct, for Irma was sitting staring at a letter she held in her hand, and which she had found in the drawer of her husband's writing table.

It read:

"Should I die in circumstances that seem in the slightest degree suspicious, the matter must be investigated. Question my wife, especially as to the history of her past life. She is in love with Mark Stanhope and he with her. One or the other of them may do me in. I shall put this note with my will, and, if necessary, my executor must take up the matter. If my death is attributed to natural causes, destroy this and forget it."

(Signed) WYATT STEELE.

The document was not dated, and Irma read it over and over until the words were fairly seared into her brain. Then, she sat staring into space, motionless and silent, until the impatient Netta peered through the keyhole in an attempt to gain some information.

All she could see, however, was a sheet of paper in a trembling hand.

Then she heard Irma rise and step about the room.

A few moments later, the door was opened and in a calm voice orders were given for dressing.

"Find me a plain black crêpe de Chine, Netta, and a bit of white collar or jabot."

"Yes, madam," returned Netta, her eyes darting about the room, and her nose, daintily sniffing, convincing her that paper had been burnt.

"I smell fire, madam," she said; "can it be there is any danger?"

"No," said Irma, calmly, "I burned a paper I wished to destroy. That is all. Throw it away. It may blow about the room."

She glanced toward an ash-tray, which held bits of charred paper. Her straightforward manner went far to convince Netta there was no mystery here, and she dismissed the matter from her mind.

Always keyed up by any excitement, Netta was fairly reveling in the present occasion, and she gathered up the bits and disposed of them, a little disappointed at Irma's lack of embarrassment.

A tray was brought to the boudoir, and to her own surprise, Irma found she was glad of some coffee and toast.

Then, unannounced, Patricia Raymond burst into the room.

"Irma, darling," she cried, in her high, staccato voice, "you poor, dear child! I just had to come to see you, and Colly is downstairs. Do see him, won't you? It'll do you good to mix a little. How are you, dearest?"

"I'm all right," Irma said, "and glad to see you. It's kind of you to come right over. Yes, I'll see Colly. Come on, we'll go down. I'm ready."

Young Kane greeted her warmly, though with the constraint always felt in a house where death is present.

But Irma's gentleness and calm put the young people at ease, and the three sat chatting in the morning-room when Serena Tenney was announced.

"You youngsters run along now," Serena ordained. "You've had your turn. I want Irma to myself."

As always, Mrs. Tenney's word was law, and the pair said their good-byes and departed.

"I want a talk with you before others come to interrupt," Serena said, when they were alone. "It's about a personal matter."

Irma caught her breath suddenly, turned white and with a voice that quivered, said, "What is it, Serena?"

"You poor child, you're all on edge. You ought to have some aromatics or something. Why, it's only this: I think you must have somebody to stay with you. Netta is a perfect maid, but just now you need some one who can do things for you socially."

"But I'm not going into society——"

"No, I know that. I mean, like a social secretary, or, rather, a friendly helper."

"Such as you could be," and Irma smiled at her good friend.

"Yes, but I can't take the job. Now, you know, reporters will come flocking, as soon as they hear of Wyatt's death. You don't want to see them, yet they must be properly dealt with. Then the undertaker's people must be conferred with. And lots of people will call; you can't see them all, yet you ought not to offend them."

"Oh, all right, I get your drift. Now who is it you have up your sleeve? If I don't like her, I won't have her."

"Well, it's Lily Mersereau."

"Mrs. Mersereau! Why, I scarcely know her."

"What of that? She is capable, kindly, well-

mannered and conversant with social amenities. It would be better in every way for you to have some one here with you, and whom can you suggest more ably fitted for the post?"

"She is willing to come, then? But, of course, or you wouldn't propose it."

"Yes, she will come if you want her. But she refuses to come unless you really do want her. She would expect the salary of the usual social secretary and she would stay only so long as you desired."

"It seems to be all arranged," Irma smiled. "And I am grateful to you, Serena. Yes, tell her I shall be glad to have her, and that I really want her. Can she come at once?"

"Yes; for I told her that these first hours would be the hardest for you. Shall I telephone her?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Of course, it must be understood that she is not to dictate or even advise. I can't stand anything of that kind."

"Oh, no, dear. The dictating and advising will be done by you. Don't take it too seriously. Let her come and try, and if you don't like to have her here, tell her so."

Serena went to telephone, and then Mark Stanhope called.

Mrs. Tenney, returning, found him with Irma, and kindheartedly took her leave and left them together.

Taking her hand, Stanhope led Irma into a small alcove off the lounge, a pleasant nook, separated from the big room by some light draperies.

Once inside the refuge, he took her in his arms and whispered, "Now it can be told!"

Irma looked at him in affright, then, amazed and overcome by the passion in his eyes, she relaxed in his arms for one blissful moment.

Then with a sigh of utter content, she smiled at him sadly, and said, "No, not yet, Mark. It's too soon."

"Yes, I suppose so. But I must hold you here a moment more—oh, Irma, my love, my love!"

Gently she moved away from him, her eyes shining, and said softly, "You must go away, dear, go at once. Don't you realize if anyone should see us, they'd know in a minute——"

And then the low, soft voice of Mrs. Mersereau was heard, as Wicks showed her in.

Irma stepped out from the alcove and greeted the newcomer with a sad little smile, as befitted a recently bereaved widow.

"I am glad to see you," she said, keeping her eyes down, lest they still showed a trace of gladness. "Mrs. Tenney promised you to me, and I know we will get on famously."

"Oh, thank you for taking it so sweetly," Lily Mersereau returned. "I only want to help and I'll do just what you want me to do."

"I'm sure you will. Come, I'll show you your room. Oh, here's Wicks; he will take you up. Wicks, put Mrs. Mersereau in the amber room, and send Netta to look after her."

After a moment she beckoned Stanhope out of his retreat.

"I wasn't hiding you," she said, "but there was no use of her knowing you were here. Now, go, and don't come back till I tell you you may." An adorable smile took the sting from her words. "And anyway, Mark, I'd rather not see you again until after the—the funeral. You are too—too upsetting."

"Very well, Irma, I shall obey you to the letter. If there is anything I can do, however unimportant, send me word, won't you?"

"Yes, I will. Now, go."

Stanhope went away, and, burying her face in her hands, Irma gave herself one long minute of rapturous dreaming, then came back to face the realities that lay before her.

She wondered, first of all, whether Lily Mersereau had heard Mark in the alcove. He made no noise, but Irma herself could hear his quick breathing, and it might have been audible to another.

She watched Lily when she came downstairs again, but save for one sharp look toward the alcove there was no hint of suspicion. Yet Irma regretted, now, that she hadn't frankly announced Mark's presence. She was to regret it more later on.

As the morning wore on it became evident that Lily Mersereau was the right one in the right place.

She was so tactful, so wise, so suave and courteous, that Irma began to wonder how she had ever lived without some one of this sort to help her. Never intrusive, but always at hand when wanted,

Lily fitted right into her niche and made good in every particular.

It was a load off Irma's mind not to have to see the reporters. And Lily not only told them just what they ought to be told and no more, but she sent them away with a happy and satisfied feeling, brought about by her kindly smile and the friendliness of her interview.

Irma fully appreciated all this, and gave Lily, in her mind, a full meed of praise. Yet she couldn't entirely get rid of the feeling that there was something about her new secretary that wasn't altogether admirable. A vague, intangible air of mystery seemed to surround Mrs. Mersereau, and Irma disliked mysteries.

Also, Lily was a trifle inclined to vaunt her own accomplishments. She announced with pride the way she had adroitly silenced a too inquisitive reporter, or had disposed of an insistent caller.

She was better-looking, Irma thought, now that she wore no dangling earrings and conspicuous bracelets. Her black gown was smart and a small string of crystal beads was her only ornament.

Studying her, unnoticed, Irma decided that her greatest bar to real beauty was her eyes. Large and dark they were, but they had a slight tendency to protuberance. When the eyelids drooped and the long lashes lay on her cheeks, Lily was very lovely, but when she raised her eyes, or opened them wide, they came perilously near meriting the unpleasant term, "pop-eyed." Not quite, though, and, in spite

of it, Mrs. Mersereau must be called a handsome woman.

Her presence and her care of the callers left Irma time to devote to her child, of which she was more than glad. A whole wing of the big house was given over to Pansy Ann, and she rejoiced in a day nursery, a night nursery, bathroom and sleeping-porch, all large, airy and beautifully appointed.

She adored her mother, and ran to greet her when she came, with loving little coos and caresses.

On this day, Irma held the child close and said nothing for a time.

"Wattamatta, Mummy?" asked the baby. "Oo sick?"

"No, dear, just wanting you to love me. Do you?"

"Ess, ess, ess!" came in crescendo tones as the child flung her little arms around Irma's neck. "Oh, there tums funny man! Me wants to see him!"

She scrambled down from her mother's lap, and ran toward the door.

"It's Oscar Mott," explained the nurse. "Miss Pansy loves him, though he's fair daft. But see him she will, every chance she gets."

"Oh, she oughtn't to! He might harm her ——"

"Oh, no, ma'am. He's lacking, but he's most kind and gentle. And he's always clean."

"Well, I hate to have baby mixed up with him. Let her see him this time, but hereafter, try to divert her attention when he comes around. Why does he come, anyway?"

"He doesn't come often, ma'am. He lives down

at the foot of the garden, you know. And he loves the flowers, and sometimes wanders about. He's entirely harmless."

"I'll go along, and see for myself," said Irma, and they all went down.

They found Mott wandering along a garden path, his lack-luster eyes of pale, dull blue fixed on the red berries of a holly tree, which was the nearest approach to flowers the garden offered. There was a greenhouse, and through its panes bright blossoms could be seen, but the gardener refused the lad entrance there.

Pansy Ann ran to meet him, and Irma watched. The half-wit paid little attention to the child, but leaned down and patted her hand in a timid fashion.

"Nice Osky," the baby prattled, "pitty Osky."

"Yes, yes," he responded, awkwardly, and gave her a vacuous smile.

Irma concluded that while she could see no explanation of the child's interest in him, at least, he was harmless, and she again advised the nurse against letting the acquaintance progress, and told her to keep Pansy away from the windows when Oscar came in sight.

As they were returning to the house, an old crone met them, and paused directly in Irma's path.

"Good morning, Mother Mullins," she said. "Nanna, take Baby back to the house. Run along, dear."

Obediently Pansy Ann went off with the nurse,

and Irma said, a little curtly, "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing, ma'am. You ain't in no position to do nothing for nobody. But belikes I can do something for you."

"I think not." Irma spoke haughtily. "If you don't want anything of me, I will say good morning."

"Not so fast, ma'am. Ain't you thinkin' about the Curse?"

"I don't know what you mean, and I don't want to know. Let me pass."

"All right. But, as you know, the Curse has fallen on your husband. You know where it is due to fall next."

In spite of her self-control, Irma turned deathly white, and closing her pale lips tightly together pushed the woman aside and hurried toward the house.

The bent old figure turned and took the path to the outer gate, chuckling horribly as she walked.

"I gave her something to think about. I sure did! Mebbe she'll get scared now!"

And Irma was scared. She walked with a trembling step until she reached her own room, and then, throwing herself across the bed, burst into a storm of tears.

Thus Lily found her when she came to announce that Mr. Wilcox, the lawyer, asked to see her.

"Poor dear," said Lily, gently stroking the lovely pale blonde hair.

But Irma disliked personal demonstration, and showed it by her somewhat pettish drawing away from the caressing hand. Always quick of understanding, Lily at once became formal, and never repeated her offense.

"Will you see him?" she inquired. "Can I help you fix up a little?"

"Yes, I'll see him. No, don't trouble about me, but please get Netta here. Will you be good enough to ring that bell, the upper one?"

Lily rang, and Netta promptly appeared, and took Irma in hand.

"My, my," she commented, "you'll need a fresh gown. This one is all crumpled. You have another black one, but you must see about ordering more, ma'am. Now, slip into this. Now, seat yourself here, please. That's right, let me fix you up. Just a 'spicion of rouge—you look like a ghost! And you've spoiled the nice set I gave your hair! Well, I'll titivate it a bit. There, now you look presenterable. Go on down, ma'am, before you flop yourself on the bed again."

This was not an unnecessary warning, for Irma's gaze strayed to the soft lace pillows and silken comforter of the *chaise longue*.

But she knew she must see the lawyer, and, summoning her will-power, she went calmly downstairs to the interview.

Half way down the thought struck her that there might be a duplicate copy of that awful note she had found, inclosed with the will. Wyatt had said he

meant to inclose it with his will, and it might be— she stopped short, grasping the banister.

Then Lily appeared at the foot of the stairs. "Ah, there you are," she said, cheerily. "Come along, Mr. Wilcox is waiting for you."

Often at her best in an emergency, Irma advanced with perfect self-composure, and greeted the lawyer pleasantly enough. He was a small man, of a nervous, apologetic type, and Irma waited for his statement.

"I am here to offer my services to you," he began, "in any way in which I can be of assistance. But especially, I want to acquaint you with the contents of Mr. Steele's will."

"Yes," said Irma, helpfully, "I shall be glad to hear about it."

"A few words will tell all," said Mr. Wilcox, whose shrewd eyes as he looked up at her somewhat belied the timidity of his demeanor. "You see, except for some minor bequests, Mr. Steele divided his estate into three equal parts. One of these portions is for yourself, one for Mr. John Black, a cousin of Mr. Steele's, and the third is left to Mr. Austin Fenn."

"Mr. Fenn! I am a little surprised, for I didn't know that the two men were such great friends."

"I don't know about that, Mrs. Steele, but that is the will. I felt you should be acquainted with its terms, or, rather, our firm thought so, and they asked me to come and tell you."

"I thank you for the courtesy," Irma said, "and

I express myself completely satisfied and contented with the report. It is not of great moment to me, for I have money of my own. But, as a matter of interest, can you tell me why he gave so much to Mr. Fenn?"

"I've no idea, save that it was his wish to do so. You, then, will raise no objections, make no hint of contest ——"

"Oh, no. It is quite all right. Is that all, Mr. Wilcox?"

"Y—yes," was the rather hesitating answer, whereupon Irma spoke out:

"Was there any communication inclosed with the will?"

"There was," replied Mr. Wilcox, looking directly at her, "but it carried no weight under the existing conditions."

"No," agreed Irma.

Chapter V

*"I've often thought that headstrong youths
Of decent education,
Determine all important truths,
With strange precipitation."*

W. S. GILBERT.

WHEN Doctor Campbell found the anonymous note on the table in his office, he was about to tear it up and throw it in the waste basket, when some impulse of caution gave him pause.

What could it mean? To be sure, he had been taught all his life to pay no attention to messages that bore no definite signature, and this was not even subscribed by "A Friend" or "One Who Knows."

Yet he stood staring at it, and wondering.

Of course it referred to Wyatt Steele's death, if, indeed, it meant anything at all. Yet who could know of Steele's death? The man had been dead less than two hours. Both Loring and himself had known he died of yellow atrophy of the liver, and he was prepared to swear to that, if need be.

Natural causes? What in the world could have ended Steele's life but natural causes? Was he then murdered, while doctors and nurses looked the other way?

Absurd! The note was a gruesome and entirely unfunny jest of some would-be wag. He would de-

stroy it, and would not even show it to Loring, for he might take it too seriously. As if such a thing could be taken seriously! Yet he put the note away in his pocket-book, and devoted himself to the business of his belated bath and breakfast.

He had remained at "The Oriels," after the death of his patient, until Mrs. Steele was duly attended to by her servants. He had left a sedative for her, in case she should grow nervous or hysterical, but he was quite sure she wouldn't need it.

A fine woman, he called her to himself—possessed of great strength of character and brave in the face of trouble.

"No," he decided, as he shaved, "no good could come from making public such a message as the one just received."

He concluded to forget it, and when he went back to his office fire, to burn it. Refreshed by his ablutions, he went whistling to his little breakfast-room, and, notwithstanding his recent tragic experience, found he had a good appetite for his bacon and eggs.

He had a tiny house in the heart of the town, and, though a young man, had already built up a most satisfactory practice among the best people.

Accredited as a physician of knowledge and good judgment, though not yet of wide experience, was he to be told by some whipper-snapper that he didn't know when or why to give a burial certificate?

He was affronted at the very idea! And yet it rankled.

Suppose, just suppose for a minute, that there

was anything wrong, anything that he had overlooked? He went back to his office and studied the pages of his books that referred to yellow atrophy of the liver.

Every symptom there catalogued was present in Steele's case. No other symptoms had appeared. There was no possibility of error. Moreover, Loring had agreed, and Loring was a smart one. Had there been anything to notice, Loring would have noticed it. He shut the books with a bang, determined to put the matter out of his mind and get at his other work, instead of which he took up the telephone and called Loring, and asked him to come over.

Loring came, rather grumblingly, for he was a busy man, but he knew Campbell would not summon him unnecessarily.

Upon his arrival, Campbell showed him the note, without a word.

"Where'd you get it?" asked Loring.

"Found it on my desk when I came in from the Steele matter."

"Where?"

"Right there. Lying in the middle of the blotting-pad."

"Who could get in? Door open?"

"Oh, yes, the door is generally on the latch. I leave it that way, in case patients come along early and have to wait."

"Then anybody could have stepped in and placed the note?"

"Yes, anybody. But who did?"

"Some one who wants to stir up trouble. I don't think it means a thing. If I were you, I'd put it away, but I wouldn't act on it in any way."

"You don't think I ought to turn it over to the police?"

"Good heavens, no! That's just what the old crank wants."

"You think some crank wrote it?"

"Of course, who else could? There's no question of the cause of death, is there?"

"Absolutely none. You know that as well as I do."

"Well, then, put the matter out of your mind."

"But the note must mean something—or, rather, it *may* mean something."

"Only the maunderings of a disordered brain."

"There's that half-wit, Mott——"

"He couldn't pull off anything of this sort. He's illiterate. I doubt if he can write his own name. No, this note is the work of an intelligent person with a bias toward mischief-making."

"Then, if it's the work of an intelligent person, he means trouble. Trouble for me, for us. I'm not going to chance that. I'm going to the police about it."

"Oh, don't, Campbell! You'll get in an awful mess. What do the police know about diagnoses? They'll assume at once we've done something wrong, and they'll mess up the whole business. No, let's try a little detective work on the problem."

"I'm no good at that sort of thing. I don't know a clue from a complex, and I hate detective stories."

"I don't, I enjoy them. But I've no talent for it, either. I'll tell you who has, though—Ray Booth. I came to know him pretty well, through attending him in the hospital, when he had a broken collar bone. He read detective stories all the time he was there, and he's clever at the game. Let's take the note to him, and see if he can't ferret out who wrote it? You know the sharps can spot typewriting as easily as penmanship."

"Booth? He's an automobile man, isn't he?"

"He's an accountant in the Ffoulkes-Ware Company. He has an office in New York, but he lives here and he's home quite a lot. Anyway, let's try him out and he'll advise us what to do about it."

"All right; can we catch him now?"

"Maybe. I'll call him up, shall I?"

Loring telephoned, and Ray Booth said he could take the next later train to the city, if they would come to see him on their errand at once.

So the two doctors hurried over to where Booth lived, only two or three blocks away.

"Have you heard of Wyatt Steele's death?" asked Loring, after greetings had been exchanged.

"Yes, my landlady just told me. She's a rare one for garnering news. Very sudden, wasn't it?"

"Rather," agreed Campbell, and then, to save time, he plunged into a succinct account of the death of Wyatt Steele, and told of the note found on his own desk.

"Extraordinary," said Booth, looking grave. "Have you the note with you?"

"Yes," and Campbell produced it.

Ray Booth scrutinized it closely, and then said, "What are you going to do about this?"

"That's what we want your advice about," Loring broke in. "I know you're fond of detective work, and know a lot about it. Do tell us what you think we ought to do."

"I'd like to tell you to burn the paper and forget it," Booth said, "but to be frank, I think it may be too serious a matter for that. Is there any chance your diagnosis might be wrong?"

"Not a chance!" declared Campbell, emphatically.

"Then," Booth hesitated, "is there any chance that any sort of attempt was made on your patient's life, in addition to or in connection with his disease?"

"No," Loring said, at once, but Doctor Campbell demurred.

"We can't say 'no' so positively," he said, "for if such a thing happened, of course, we knew nothing of it. But I can't conceive of any such case ——"

"Of course not!" cried Loring, vehemently. "The idea is too absurd. No, Mr. Booth, nothing like that. What we want of you is advice about the note—whether to discard it, or to take it seriously and find out who wrote it."

"Which would be a difficult job," Booth told them.

"But I thought," Loring persisted, "it was so easy to trace typewriting."

"It is, if you have the evidence of a given machine. But—well, look at this. Here are the points so beloved of fiction-writers. Here is an E out of alignment. Here is a G slightly askew. And the W is a broken type and the O is chock-full of dirt. I see the message was written on a small-size Corona. That's the kind I use myself, so I can show you right now what I mean."

He stepped across the room, and, placing a paper in his own typewriter, struck off a few lines.

"See," he said, showing it to them. "The type is the same on my machine—I mean as to size and style. But on mine the F is a little off the level, the R is, too, and the S is slanted a bit. So, you see, it wasn't written on my Corona. But there are many thousands of others, and without a hint of any way to look, how can we find our man by such means?"

"We might canvass Kavanagh ——" began Doctor Campbell.

"And annoy all our worthy citizens without doing any good. For the man who wrote that note is too shrewd to leave his typewriter lying around loose!"

"How do you know he's shrewd, just from those few lines?" asked Campbell, getting interested in detective methods, although he had scoffed at them.

"From the general phraseology, the lack of pretended illiteracy that most anonymous letters show, and the neat appearance of paper and typing."

"Yet he may be a slipshod sort of person, using neat effects to disguise himself," offered Loring.

"Then he is even more shrewd than I thought," returned Booth, looking sharply at the speaker.

For a moment, Doctor Campbell was frightened, fearing that the quick glance Booth gave to Loring was tinged with suspicion.

Yet that was too absurd, and Campbell awaited the final advice of the man he now began to think was quite capable of advising him. And after a moment Booth spoke:

"I'm sorry if I run counter to your opinions or wishes, but it seems to me there is only one road open to you. And that leads straight to the police. I know how you feel about consulting the Force, but as good citizens and reputable physicians you cannot afford to run the risk of future trouble. I know, of course, the scorn and superciliousness with which anonymous letters are usually considered, but, in spite of that, they *are* considered, and carefully, by those who know their business. Again, either this note is the vicious and lying concoction of some wicked or insane person, or it is founded on fact. If the former, it can do no real harm. If the latter, you must agree that the matter should be brought out into the light."

"But the publicity—the notoriety——" began Loring.

"There may be none," Booth told them. "The police may conclude that this note is a negligible matter. They may even know who wrote it. You

know of the 'poison pen' people. If it is their work, the police will know it, and the whole business will be hushed up."

"And that's who it is!" cried Loring. "I've heard of the 'poison pen'—usually a woman, isn't it? They just want to stir up trouble. Let's go to the police, Cam, and see what's doing. Then you don't want to investigate, Mr. Booth? I hoped the case might intrigue you."

"I'm not a detective," Booth smiled at the impetuous young man. "But if the police are interested, and if I can help them in any way, I'll gladly do so. Of course, my interest would be all with Mrs. Steele. Though I know her only casually, I admire her very much. I was there at supper on Sunday night."

"Why, that's the occasion when we think Steele's mortal illness began," Doctor Campbell said. "Did you notice his indisposition?"

"Not in the least. He was not overly ebullient of spirits, but he did not seem ill in any way."

"Always a cross-grained cuss," observed Loring. "Did he over-eat or over-drink?"

"No, I think not. I played bridge with him after supper, and he played a fine game."

"And said no word of feeling ill?"

"Not a word. He seemed perfectly fit, so far as I could judge. Well, I'm sorry to be inhospitable, but I must hike for my train. Call on me again if I can be of any service."

As the two doctors walked away, Loring said:

"He was kind and polite, but he didn't seem ter-

ribly interested. I thought he'd jump at the chance to investigate the mysterious note."

"Oh, often people like to talk about investigation, but when it comes down to cases, they shy off. Maybe he admires Mrs. Steele, and doesn't want to be mixed up in an investigation."

"All right, Cam, maybe that's it. Now, I'm due back at the hospital; if you're going to Headquarters, you'll have to go by yourself."

"Well, I'm going. I've just thought of something, but if the police ignore this precious document, I won't have to go any further. Let's hope they will scorn it as material evidence."

And so it came about that Doctor Campbell soon found himself closeted with Inspector Culliss, and pouring out his story to two very astonished ears.

"But it's ridiculous," said the Inspector. "If two wise guys like you and Doc. Loring say the man died of atrophy of the yellow liver, why, he did die of that. Nobody is going to doubt you."

"Somebody *does* doubt us—witness this note," rejoined Campbell.

"Naw. That note don't mean doubt of you two sawbones. It just means a diseased mind, pining for some sensational excitement."

"Then, you advise me to ignore the note?" Dave Campbell's spirits began to rise.

"Yes—unless ——" Inspector Culliss looked very stern, "unless there is the least, tiny mite of doubt in your mind that your diagnosis is the true one. Is

there any shadow of possibility that any other agency may have been at work?"

Quite suddenly Doctor Campbell changed his opinion of Culliss. He had taken him for an easy-going, unobservant sort of chap, and here he was putting his finger on the vital spot. For there was a shadow of the suggested possibility. There was a tiny mite of doubt in his mind, planted there by a few lines he had hastily read in his medical book, even as he was putting the tome away.

"Yes," he said, dejectedly, "there is a bare chance that some—some other agency might have been at work."

"Tell me all about it. Come clean, son. You are young in your profession and it won't do you any good to hold back something that may boomerang back to you later on."

"Oh, it isn't a case of confession," Dave Campbell gave his frank smile, "but I chanced to learn, since I left the Steele house, that there is another element that could be a factor in that man's death. A factor that must make me hesitate before writing my certificate. I'm afraid I diagnosed too quickly."

"All right, what is it? A person?"

"No. That is, it would have to be the work of a person, I suppose, but what I mean is an inanimate factor."

"Oh, go on. Get it off your chest."

"Well, it's just this. All the symptoms Wyatt Steele's case showed are the symptoms of yellow

atrophy of the liver. But—the symptoms of phosphorus-poisoning are precisely the same.”

“H’m! You say you just found that out?”

“Why, I must have seen the statement before in my reading, but it didn’t register in my brain. When looking up the liver disease, this morning, I half saw, as I returned the book to the shelf, that phosphorus-poisoning caused identically the same effects. I admit I was too precipitate in my statements.”

“Have you had an autopsy?”

“No, I saw no necessity.”

“Do you see a necessity now?”

“Yes, Inspector, I do. It must be done.”

“Sure. Go to it, lad, and don’t say anything about all this, till you get your facts straightened out.”

Dave Campbell went slowly away, feeling that he had too great a responsibility on his young shoulders. He had taken the practice of a much older doctor who had died in the harness, and there was no other general practitioner in town. The hospital doctors were mostly young and the others such hide-bound old fogies that Campbell was practically unacquainted with them. Also, he proposed to swing this thing himself. It had come to him; he must cope with it.

It was far from pleasant to go to Mrs. Steele and tell her that an autopsy on her husband’s body was necessary, but that, too, must be faced. He needn’t tell her why, at present. He called up Loring, and made arrangements to take the body of Steele to the

hospital for the post mortem, and then went on to "The Oriels."

Irma received him, looking a little surprised, but calmly gracious.

He put the case to her, straightforwardly, saying that he could not conscientiously sign his certificate without an autopsy, and asked her permission.

To his amazement, her entire manner changed.

At first, she drew herself up, haughtily, and declared that she would never consent to his request, that the certificate must be signed without further delay. She reminded him that he had made his statement at the time of Mr. Steele's death, and there was no reason why he should change his mind.

Campbell was in a quandary. He hated to admit that he had been too hasty in his positive assertion of the cause of the death, and hated to own up that a line in his medical book had opened his eyes to a possible truth, yet, he must explain his procedure.

He told her there was a doubt as to the exact nature of the disease, and that he must be assured of the positive facts, and that only an autopsy could disclose those facts. He told her he failed to understand her desperate objection to this course, for while a feeling of sentiment might make the idea distasteful, yet such thoughts ought not to stand in the way of the processes of science and medical achievement.

But Irma Steele looked at him with frightened eyes—eyes that had turned a deep, stormy gray, as

they always did when she was under stress of strong emotion.

"Oh, please," she whispered, a strained quality in her voice that pierced his very heart, "oh, Doctor Campbell, please don't do that! Please, get along without it, somehow. You will break my heart!"

"Why, Mrs. Steele, why are you so terribly averse to it? I can understand a disinclination, but you are—why, you are frightened of it!"

"Yes, I am—I am! So please, give up the idea. You said what he died of. You called it atrophy of the liver. Don't carry that matter any further. Let it go at that. Please!"

It was hard to resist her pleading, hard to insist in the face of that utter and genuine distress. Campbell hesitated. If only he hadn't seen that damned line in the book. If only he could bring himself to sign the certificate without the autopsy.

But he couldn't. Had he considered himself alone, he would have done it, but his profession, his oath, his loyalty to the cause, none of these things would allow his deviation from the right. And he knew the right.

"I am more sorry than I can tell you, Mrs. Steele," he said, "but there is no room for argument. If I do not have this autopsy performed, I cannot give the burial certificate. If I do not do that, the matter will be taken up by the authorities ——"

"Oh," she gave a violent start, "you—you mean the police?"

"Yes."

A low moan was the answer to this, and Irma closed her eyes for a moment.

Then, suddenly, she opened her eyes, resumed her haughty, even icy air, and said, quietly, "Very well, Doctor Campbell, you have convinced me of the necessity of what you suggest. I give you my permission, if that is what you want. Will you attend to the details of the matter without my personal assistance?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Steele, you need not be troubled in the matter at all."

"And also, Doctor, will you promise to acquaint me with your findings at the earliest possible moment?"

"Assuredly. I will tell you myself."

"Thank you. I trust it will be no alarming or disturbing news."

"I hope not. And I can almost say I am sure not. Don't take it all so hard. It is a most usual proceeding, like embalming or cremation."

He was watching her closely, for he couldn't understand this sensible, self-reliant woman making such a fuss over nothing. But he saw only a flicker of her white eyelids, a quiver of her sensitive mouth, and then she gave him a smile which seemed almost natural, although he knew it to be forced.

She rang a bell for Gregg and directed him to attend upon Doctor Campbell and render any assistance he could, then, with a grave face, she bowed slightly to the doctor and left the room.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" Dave Campbell told him-

self, utterly unable to read aright the strange behavior of this newly made widow.

He said no word to the valet, beyond necessary directions, but Gregg, filled with curiosity at this new development, endeavored to put a few carefully veiled questions.

They brought no response from the doctor, save a curt yes or no, so with the amiable idea of giving this taciturn fellow a jolt, Gregg remarked, blandly, "Well, I guess Mrs. Steele will see spooks now, for fair!"

"Is this house haunted?" said the doctor, unthinkingly—almost unconsciously—for his mind was on other things.

"Oh, my, yes!" returned Gregg, and the conversation was closed.

Chapter VI

*"My own convenience count as nil.
It is my duty and I will."*

W. S. GILBERT.

IT WAS about four o'clock that same afternoon when Doctor Campbell returned to "The Oriels."

Irma received him alone, in a small room which Steele had used as a study or office—a plain, somewhat severe little room, rather in contrast to the more luxurious appointments of the rest of the house.

And Irma, in her plain black gown, her pale face serene and composed, sat waiting, in a straight, high-backed chair, for whatever revelations might be made her. Lily had begged to be present also, but this was refused.

Feeling a decided distaste for his errand, Doctor Campbell endeavored to approach the subject in a roundabout way.

"Please come directly to the point," Irma asked of him. "I much prefer straightforward methods. Was my husband's death due to a natural illness?"

"No, Mrs. Steele, it was not. I, too, prefer direct speech, so I will tell you that Mr. Steele died from the effects of phosphorus-poisoning. The poison was, in some way, taken into the stomach, and since the symptoms and effects of this are precisely the same as the symptoms and effects of yellow atrophy of

the liver, it is not surprising that we assumed that to have been his malady."

"No," Irma said, looking at him with scared eyes, "no—it is not surprising. And—and now—what happens?"

"I am sorry to distress you, but the usual routine must be followed. The coroner must be called in ——"

"Oh, no, no! Not that!"

Though her voice was shrill and strained, she kept a grip on herself and faced him steadily.

Then, more calmly, she continued:

"Please, Doctor Campbell, don't subject me to the ordeal of police interference. Settle up the matter, somehow ——"

"It is not possible, Mrs. Steele. Try to understand. Your husband was poisoned. Now, unless it was accidental, or unless he poisoned himself, this is a case of murder. And these things must be found out. The truth must be learned and only the police have a right to conduct this investigation."

"But if it was accidental ——"

"Not very likely. Phosphorus is not found in the usual family medicine chest. Nor have you reason to think Mr. Steele wanted to end his own life, have you?"

"Why not?" cried Irma, with the look of one grasping at a straw. "He may have done it."

"If so, it will be discovered. You do not know of any phosphorus being in the house?"

"No. I don't know anything of drugs. What is it like?"

"It may be powder or liquid. Or it may be merely the broken ends from phosphorus matches. But that is immaterial. The first thing to learn is whether the death was accident, suicide or murder. For it must have been one of the three."

"And you have to call the police to decide that?"

"The coroner. Not exactly the police ——"

"It's all the same. Then there must be an inquest ——and all that horror ——"

"Perhaps. Now, Mrs. Steele, try to look at it rationally. The coroner, Doctor Meade, is a very kindly man, and when he comes to interview you he may be able to settle the whole question. I take it you know nothing that would throw any light on the matter?"

"Nothing at all," returned Irma, with a sudden accession of dignity. "You will, of course, conduct the affair as you see fit. I assume I need not be expected to assist. I have a friend—a companion, who will represent me."

"You have a lawyer?"

"Why, no—not now," and Irma looked startled. "You see, my husband was my lawyer—before I married him, and, of course, since, whenever I have needed legal advice."

"You will require a lawyer, I feel sure. Why not select one among your friends?"

"I will. But I can't decide on one just now."

"Don't delay. I must not hide from you, Mrs.

Steele, that there may be grave questions arising, and you must not try to cope with the situation alone. Do you know Mr. Fenn? Austin Fenn?"

"Oh, yes. Is he a lawyer? I thought he was mixed up with the Film companies."

"He is, as counsel. But he has private clients. Why not let him act for you? Your estate must be looked after by some one."

"Yes. I hadn't realized that. Now Mr. Steele is gone, I must have a lawyer, I see that."

And then Irma lapsed into deep thought. She seemed to forget the very presence of her visitor, and sat, staring into nothingness for so long a time, that Campbell looked at her with the eye of a physician.

He soon decided, however, that though greatly perturbed, her iron will was preventing anything of the nature of a collapse, and he concluded his mission was practically accomplished.

Not sorry to go, he rose, saying, "Then, Mrs. Steele, I will send the coroner to see you. Pray do not feel unnecessary alarm. Await developments from your interview with him. You will have some one with you?"

"Yes. Some friends of my own choosing. Good afternoon, Doctor Campbell."

Surprised rather than offended by her curtness, Campbell went from her presence, closing behind him the door of the small room.

Left alone, Irma sat like one turned to stone. Her deep-set, gray eyes grew dark and stormy as

her whole frame quivered with strong emotion. Then there came into her face a haunted, hunted look, and she clenched her hands and with difficulty restrained herself from uttering some cry of distress.

"I have to go through with it," she told herself; "I have to face it. I must not break down! Nobody here knows anything. I've nothing to fear. I have only myself to rely upon. But—but—oh, my God!"

She buried her face in her hands and sat motionless for a few moments. Then, rousing, she shook her head, squared her shoulders, and rose from her seat. Producing her vanity case, she carefully removed all traces of emotion or excitement, and, managing a smile, she stepped from the room.

She found Lily awaiting her in the living-room, and with her, Serena Tenney and Mark Stanhope. She smiled at Serena and frowned at Mark, who refused to accept the frown, and smiled in return, as he offered her a chair.

"Well," she said, opening the subject at once, "the doctors have decided that Wyatt didn't die of an illness, but was poisoned somehow."

"Ptomaine?" asked Serena.

"No. Phosphorus."

"Good Lord!" Mrs. Tenney gasped. "What in the world would he take phosphorus for? That's what they make matches out of!"

"Never mind," Irma went on. "That's what he died of. Now, if you please, the coroner is coming to see me about it, and you can stay or not, Serena, as you choose. Mark, you can go home. And, as I'm

advised to have a lawyer, I'm going to call up Mr. Fenn."

"He's an awful expensive proposition," Serena told her. "Sure you can afford it?"

"All good lawyers are expensive. Wyatt was the best lawyer I've ever known, and I must now choose the next best."

"Fenn's all right," Stanhope observed. "As a lawyer. But he's a slippery eel, and—oh, well, you know your own business."

"I do," Irma agreed. "None better. Lily, will you call Mr. Fenn on the telephone?"

Already, Irma was depending on her new aid as secretary and companion, but so friendly was her manner that Lily took no offense.

Austin Fenn was easily persuaded to come over to "The Oriels" on a business errand. Mrs. Tenney declared her intention of staying, and no arguments could make Mark Stanhope depart.

"But I don't want you here," Irma told him, a gentle note in her voice almost contradicting her words.

"Sorry. But I gotta stay; I just feel impelled to!"

And then, Wicks appeared, announcing Inspector Culliss and his associates. Doctor Campbell was one of these, and another was a police detective, whose alert black eyes darted from one to another of the group before him.

Campbell looked solicitously at Irma, but she faced the Inspector with a calm, detached air that spoke well for her self-control.

"I learn, Mrs. Steele," Culliss began, "that your husband died from the effects of phosphorus-poisoning."

The man's attitude was distinctly bullying, and Stanhope rose and took a seat nearer to Irma.

But she answered, in the coolest way possible, "Yes, Inspector. Doctor Campbell told me that, too."

"Who, in your opinion, gave him that poison?" Culliss still used his blustering tone, but Irma's calm seemed to tone down his manner a little.

"I have no idea," she replied, with a steady, level gaze, that he seemed to find a trifle disconcerting.

As a matter of fact, the Inspector had not had much experience with deaths by poison, and was not familiar with the usage of what he called "high society." He was uncertain whether to proceed in his ordinary heckling fashion, or whether this case called for gentler measures.

The Sergeant Detective, whose name was Olcott, came to his aid.

"Lemme ask some questions," he suggested, "and you listen in."

Rather relieved, Culliss sat back and let this plan develop.

Olcott was a young chap, with bright blue eyes and quick wits. He went straight to the point and said, "Mrs. Steele, have you any reason to think your husband would take his own life?"

"I had no direct information on the subject. But

frequently suicides do not confide their intentions beforehand."

"That is true," began Olcott, when Serena interrupted, "Of course, Wyatt Steele didn't kill himself! How absurd! It must have been an accident—it *had* to be!"

"You think so?" the detective was quite ready to glean information from any source whatever. And he hoped, with a pack of chattering women, to get at some facts. "Now, Mrs. Steele, can you suggest any way such an accident might occur? Was there any phosphorus in the house?"

"I don't know. There may have been. Of course, there were matches."

"Phosphorus matches? They are not common."

"Oh, I don't know. How should I know?" Irma had turned petulant.

"Never mind," Olcott went on, smoothly. "That can be looked into. But supposing there had been phosphorus in the house, was it likely it could accidentally get into Mr. Steele's food or drink?"

"Hardly likely," Irma said, coldly. "But, of course, possible."

"Scarcely possible, unless the poison was in the kitchen, or wherever his food was prepared. Moreover, if it had been an accident, occurring, say, in kitchen or pantry, would not other members of the family have been affected?"

"It would seem so," Irma told him, her manner disclosing a lack of interest in these queries.

"I learn from the attending physician and from

the coroner that the poisonous phosphorus was taken into the stomach of Mr. Steele at some time after five o'clock on Sunday afternoon."

"How can they tell that?" Irma spoke impulsively.

"Because," Olcott watched her closely, "they know all about the action of that poison, and can gauge accurately its workings in the human system."

Irma turned so white that Lily, alarmed, came and sat by her.

"Don't fuss over me," Irma exclaimed, shortly. "I'm all right. Go on, Sergeant. What are you proving from that?"

"Only that, beyond all question, Mr. Steele was poisoned at the supper party on Sunday evening."

"Not beyond all question," Irma corrected him. "If it were suicide, he did not get the poison in his food."

"No, but we have no reason to assume suicide."

"Nor have you reason to assume homicide," Irma told him, coolly. "I think you have few, if any, facts to work upon. You know he died from poison—you know nothing more. Would it not be better to get some facts before proceeding further?"

"Indeed, yes. And that is just what we are trying to do now. As you know, a suicide almost invariably leaves a note behind, explaining his deed. Have you found any such note?"

"No," and Irma shook her head.

"Can you bring any witness to tell of any poison

of that sort in the house that could have been accidentally used?"

"I am not bringing witnesses—that is your work."

"And will be duly attended to. Unless some evidence of the sort is brought out, we are forced to consider the question of murder. Do you know of any enemies Mr. Steele had?"

"Enemies, in a business sense, perhaps. Opposing lawyers, disgruntled clients. But none who would murder him!"

"To your knowledge, no. Yet it may have been done."

The Inspector now took a hand.

"We are pretty sure, Mrs. Steele," he began, in his ponderous but not unkindly way, "that the gentleman was killed, that he was poisoned purposely and with evil motive. We shall investigate to find the criminal. Should our investigations bring out facts that point to accident or suicide, rest assured they will be most carefully dealt with. Now, you will pardon me, if I ask you a few questions about yourself. How long have you lived in Kavanagh?"

To the surprise of her friends, this simple question acted on Irma like a bolt from the blue. She cringed as under a blow. Every vestige of color left her face and she looked at Mark Stanhope with a quivering sigh that he failed to understand but which stirred his very soul.

"Look here," he interrupted, "Mrs. Steele is all in. She is in a nervous state, and I beg you, Inspec-

tor, to postpone this quiz until to-morrow. Do, there's a good chap."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Stanhope, but I can't do that. Mrs. Steele has nothing to fear. I'm not going to quiz her, as you term it. But I must have answers to these simple preliminary questions before I can get on with my work. I can think of no reason why Mrs. Steele should be so exceedingly agitated. Let us go on. When did you come here to live?"

Once more mistress of herself, Irma sat up straighter, and replied calmly, "I came here to live last May, eight months ago."

"And you were living here when you married Mr. Steele?"

"Yes, I married him last October."

"You have been married before?"

"Yes. My first husband was Charles Darcy."

"Where did you live while married to him?"

"We lived in—abroad."

"Where, abroad?"

"In Algeciras, a small town in southern Spain."

"Why did you live there?"

Irma stared at him.

"Because it was Mr. Darcy's home," she said, coldly. "Because it was a place of great beauty and charm, and because we were very happy there."

"I see. You have a child?"

"Yes, my daughter was born in Algeciras, two years ago."

"How long were you married to Mr. Darcy?"

"About two years. He died something more than a year ago."

"Did you know Mr. Steele before coming to Kavanagh to live?"

"No, I had never met him until I came here."

"Then you married him after a short acquaintance?"

"Yes."

"You two were happily married?"

Irma shrugged her shoulders.

"As modern marriages go," she said. "We were as happy as the average."

"I see. Pray do not resent my questions. It is necessary to make a great many inquiries in the hope of unearthing some facts bearing on the mystery of Mr. Steele's death. I am sure you want to help us."

"I am not sure that I do. If Mr. Steele was murdered, I most assuredly have no desire to assist actively in the search for the criminal. That is your work."

"Quite so. Now, Mrs. Steele, this is your house?"

"It is."

"It was yours before you married Mr. Steele?"

"Oh, yes. I bought it when I first came to Kavanagh."

"You are a rich woman?"

"My first husband left me a comfortable fortune."

"Where were you born, Mrs. Steele?"

"In—in Kansas."

"What city or town?"

"Manning's Corners."

"That was the post office?"

"Yes."

"And you left there, when?"

"About three years ago."

"Going from there to Algeciras?"

"Yes."

But Irma was weakening. This grilling, mild though it was, for some reason was fraying her nerves, sapping her strength.

Serena and Lily looked at her solicitously. Mark Stanhope, torn by a desire to leap at the throat of the Inspector, forced himself to sit quietly and avoid a scene.

Olcott, the detective, made notes and nodded his head complacently as he learned these bits of Irma's history.

But the inexorable voice went on.

"A few more points, Mrs. Steele. Why did you go to Algeciras?"

"Merely for a pleasure trip." Irma spoke lightly now. "I had been a school teacher and had saved up money for a trip to Europe. So I went."

"When you started, did you plan to go to Algeciras?"

"No, I was *en route* to Naples. But the steamer stopped at Gibraltar for a day. While at Gibraltar, I went for a short boat ride over to Algeciras."

"And married Mr. Darcy and stayed there."

"Exactly. A romantic episode, but Spain is the land of romance."

"Mrs. Steele, when you left your home—Manning's Corners, Kansas, did you or did you not say these words: 'I want to see the world. I shall never marry any of the men about here. I want to go where I can meet men more worthy of me. I am going to Europe and I shall not return until I am married and have a child.' Did you say that?"

Irma met his gaze steadily. And her voice was clear and calm as she replied, "I am not sure of the exact wording, but I most certainly voiced those sentiments. They were the truth. The young men in my home town were ignorant and countrified. I longed to see the world, to meet people I could like and admire, to meet a man in whose keeping I could give my whole heart. I am not ashamed of such sentiments. They are in the breast of many a girl who has not the courage to put them in words."

Serena Tenney reached out and took her hand. Lily Mersereau drew back a little.

Mark Stanhope sat very still, looking, as he felt, utterly dumbfounded.

"I see," declared Inspector Culliss, though his statement wasn't quite true. "And when you were at Algeciras, for a short time, you met Mr. Darcy."

"Yes, he was on the boat going from Gibraltar. We liked one another at sight, and the liking quickly ripened into love. We married and remained there."

"Yes—I see—yes. And what was his name?"

"Charles Darcy." The answer was clearly spoken, but the deep-set eyes fell and the interlaced fingers tightened their muscles.

"I mean his real name," said Culliss, quietly.

"His Spanish name was Carlos Dercia. I anglicized it to Charles Darcy myself."

"After his death?"

"Yes—after his death."

"And his death? How did that occur?"

"He was ill, for a few days."

"In Algeciras?"

"Yes. We lived nowhere else."

"And he was ill there?"

"Yes."

"Of what disease?"

Irma glared at him now. Her eyes were glittering with the rage of a baffled tigress. Her mouth quivered and her breast heaved with quick gasps of grief and despair.

But with a last attempt at lightness, she said:

"Oh, a sort of—of typhoid-pneumonia."

"The truth, please, Mrs. Steele."

"I don't know what he had. I don't know what he died of."

"Then I will tell you. He was said, at first, to have died of yellow atrophy of the liver, but it was soon proved that he died of phosphorus-poisoning. And—you were held accountable for his death!"

Chapter VII

"I present any lady

Whose conduct is shady or smacking of doubtful propriety;

When virtue would quash her

I take and whitewash her and launch her in frstrate society."

W. S. GILBERT.

THE blow had fallen. Irma sat quietly in her chair—motionless, in fact. Not an eyelash quivered, not a finger trembled. She looked tranquil rather than despairing.

Yet it was the tranquillity of despair. None present could know of the horror and terror conjured up in her mind by the Inspector's words. A phrase came to her mind that she had once read somewhere. It was "the peace of defeat." It seemed to Irma that she had reached that point—the peace of defeat.

But only for a moment. Only because of the numbing realization that her secret was known, that it was useless to struggle longer to hide her past.

The inexorable voice continued:

"Is not that the truth, Mrs. Steele? Were you not accused and tried for the death of your first husband?"

"Yes," said Irma, the word wrung from her tortured soul. "Yes, I was. I was wrongfully accused, tried and acquitted ——"

"Acquitted for lack of evidence," Culliss said,

grimly. "And now, your second husband is dead by the same means and in similar circumstances."

Something in his tone stung Irma to defense. She sat up straighter, looked at the speaker with an air of disdain, and said, quietly, "Yes, that is true. But I had no hand in the death of either of those two men."

"I hope not," said Culliss, speaking sincerely. "But the matter has to be investigated, as I am sure you understand. Now, if you please ——"

"Wait a moment," Mark Stanhope interrupted; "I think, Mrs. Steele, you should answer no more questions without legal advice. It is all wrong for you to act alone in this matter. You must be represented by a competent lawyer, and I beg of you to refuse to talk further until you have legal counsel. After all, Inspector, the facts you have stated about the death of Mrs. Steele's first husband have no real bearing on the present case."

"Not as evidence, no. But as a sidelight on the matter ——"

"We are not interested in your sidelights. I suggest that you leave Mrs. Steele alone now. She will engage counsel and grant you another interview after that."

Inspector Culliss stared. The police are not exactly accustomed to having interviews granted them at the convenience of their suspects. And a suspect Irma Steele undoubtedly was. But her white face with its tortured eyes and tightly drawn lips gave

Inspector Culliss pause, and he concluded to go away and take a little more time to think things out.

He voiced this decision, and, after extracting Irma's promise not to leave the house, he collected his Sergeant Detective and went away.

Doctor Campbell, remaining, took temporary charge of the situation.

"I fear, Mrs. Steele," he began, a little curtly, "you are in for an unpleasant ordeal. As between friends, will you tell me if that is all true—I mean, that your first husband died in similar circumstances to Mr. Steele?"

"It is true," Irma said, her voice low, but entirely steady. "The symptoms were about the same. The doctors diagnosed yellow atrophy of the liver. Later, a question was raised and an autopsy revealed phosphorus-poisoning. I tell you all this frankly, for it will become known, anyhow. And I shall doubtless be suspected of having poisoned Mr. Steele. But I did not do so, nor did I poison Mr. Darcy."

"Then you have some enemy who, in both cases, tried to do you a great injury."

"It would seem so, yet I cannot imagine who such an enemy can be."

"You stood trial, then—in Algeciras?"

"Yes; it was a hasty and ill-managed affair. There were few English-speaking men among the authorities, and I was acquitted, as Mr. Culliss said, for lack of evidence. I wonder where he learned all that."

"You thought your secret safe?"

"I certainly did. No one knew it in Kavanagh, I am sure, except Mr. Steele. I told him all before I married him."

"And he deemed you innocent?"

"Certainly." Irma gave him a scornful glance, and, indeed, Doctor Campbell's face showed an expression of disbelief in the suggested innocence. Seeing this, she resumed the haughty air she had worn before the detectives, but which she had partially dropped, thinking herself among friends.

"You do not believe in me, Doctor Campbell, and, therefore, I prefer not to talk with you further on this subject. If it is necessary for you to see me in the future, I will keep an appointment, but, if possible, please conduct the business through my lawyer."

A queen could have given no more gracious dismissal, and, looking a little uncomfortable, Doctor Campbell went away.

"I am rather alone," Irma said, then. "But I shall be able to cope with the situation. Lily, if you prefer not to remain with me, under the circumstances, I am not in a position to urge you to stay."

Lily Mersereau looked troubled.

"I'm sure I don't know what to do," she began, uncertainly.

"For heaven's sake," exclaimed Serena, "if you don't know what to do, you'd better go! And yet, Irma can't be left alone—and I can't stay with her. I say, Irma, I'm for you. I don't care anything about

facts and evidences and all that. I'm your friend, and I'll back you to the last ditch!"

"Oh, well," Lily said, "if you feel like that about it——"

"I do," reiterated Serena, "and you'd better feel the same. Look here, Lily, you're a good one for this place. You can help Irma a whole lot, and I want you to stand by. Understand?"

Lily Mersereau did understand. She knew Serena Tenney was a power in Kavanagh, and a word of praise or dispraise from her could make or break a woman's social prestige. No, she had no desire to incur Serena's displeasure. Moreover, for reasons of her own, she wanted to know how things were going, and how better keep in touch than by staying right on in the house?

"I'm glad to stand by," she said, with a sympathetic smile at Irma. "It may be I can help you by my staunch support as well as in more material ways."

Mark Stanhope looked at her quizzically.

"Don't bother about the staunch support," he said. "You help Mrs. Steele in the matter of callers and interviewers, and be around when she wants a woman friend near her. I'll do a little myself in the staunch support line. I'll see to it that her friends do not desert her, that——"

"You can't help that, Mark," Irma said, her eyes, for the first time, showing unshed tears. "My friends will desert me—that goes without saying. You see, I've been through this before——"

She broke down utterly then, and, rising, she quickly left the room, and Lily followed.

"It's damnable!" Mark said to Serena; "utterly damnable! She no more poisoned Wyatt Steele than Pansy Ann did! Some bone-headed detectives dug up that old story about her ——"

"Did you know about that before?" Serena interrupted him.

"No, I didn't and I don't care a whoop in Hades what they dig up! Irma is an angel from heaven, no more capable of crime or any sort of wrong-doing than one of those same angels! You know it, Serena! You know ——"

"I don't know anything, Mark, and you don't either. Remember, a year ago, we had neither of us ever heard of Irma Steele. She came here out of the blue, a widow with a baby girl. In a few months she married Wyatt, and nobody knows why."

"It's nobody's business. She didn't kill him, and that's all that matters now."

"I agree to that. And I assume you're going to move heaven and earth to find out who did."

"Either that, or—to have the matter dropped."

"Oh, then you're not altogether certain of her innocence."

"I am, of course. But I know how those blundering policemen twist and turn things to make black seem white. And they'll railroad her through, unless somebody puts the kibosh on them. And I'm going to do it."

"Your zeal is commendable," said Serena, with a

slight drawl, "but it takes a lot more than zeal to clear up a serious matter of this sort."

"And I'll have a lot more than zeal. I'm going to get a detective, one of the big, high-up ones, and he'll find the real criminal, and so clear Irma of suspicion."

"You're very much in love with her?"

"You're darned well tooting I am! Forgive my 'langwitch,' but I get so mad at this fate that dogs her footsteps—I say, Serena, do you know about the Curse?"

"Only vaguely. What is it?"

"That precious first husband of hers—the Algeciras Señor—informed her as he lay a-dying, I believe, that if she married again he would haunt her."

"A haunt isn't a curse."

"No, there's a curse, too. And that—oh, I don't know as I ought to tell these things ——"

"Did Irma tell them to you?"

"Yes, of course; how else could I know them?"

"She cares for you?"

"Well—yes, she does, though while Steele was alive, she wouldn't admit it. But now ——"

"As the man hasn't been dead twenty-four hours yet, your 'but now' sounds rather shocking."

"Lord, I don't care! I'm going to marry that woman just as soon as it's humanly possible, which means as soon as she'll consent."

"She has a lot to go through with first."

"Yes, poor dear. Serena, you *are* her friend, aren't you?"

"I am, Mark. But, I'll admit to you, largely from a sense of duty. You see, when she first came here, she came to me and offered me good payment to launch her into society. There was nothing wrong about this—at least, if there was, I didn't know it. I took her money—that's rather my business, you know ——"

"What is? Taking money?"

"No! Launching people in society. And Irma was a stranger, an attractive young widow, and she wanted to get in the right set. So I helped her."

"And she paid you. That's all right. That's the way such things are conducted nowadays, I understand. Well, so now, because of that, you propose to stand up for her. Well, you'd better."

"Unless things go too badly. If she is really suspected of Wyatt's death, of course ——"

"Of course you'd desert her! You women are all alike!"

"I know it. You saw how hard it was to persuade Lily Mersereau to stay here. You're in love with her, but do you suppose the rest of her men friends will stick? No. They'll call once or twice and then drift away."

"Let 'em! I can take care of Irma, myself. And I'm going to get a detective up from New York ——"

"Ray Booth is a good detective. Why not employ him?"

"He one of your—er—clients?"

Serena had the grace to look a little sheepish.

"Well, he said this afternoon, if he could help in that way, he was a detective, of sorts."

"Amateur sorts?"

"Perhaps. But the amateur detective is the one that succeeds—at least, in the story-books. I hope Irma will employ Ray. He's terribly clever."

"All your geese are swans." Mark smiled at the sweet-faced, guileful old person, and then, remembering that Serena was a power, he said, hastily, "Very likely she will. I'll advise it, unless she, too, feels she'd like a more experienced man."

Lily came back then, and offered Irma's excuses for not appearing again that evening.

"The poor dear is all in," Lily said. "She is keeping up wonderfully, of course, but it is through sheer will-power. If she can sleep to-night, she will be fit enough to-morrow, but if she is wakeful, I shall give her a sedative."

"Good for you, Lily," approved Serena. "You are showing the right interest in her welfare. Now, you keep it up. She's paying your salary, and as long as you stay with her she deserves your best attention."

Stanhope looked at the two women.

Only paid services for Irma! For Irma, who deserved the love and reverence of the whole world, who ought to have homage and service from all who knew her—from hearts flooded with gratitude at the opportunity of doing anything for her! And these women stood up for her, because she paid them!

Well, he would change all that. He would first vindicate her so thoroughly, so indubitably, that her detractors would cringe in shame. Then, he would put her on her right pedestal and the whole world should worship her.

"Tell me, Mr. Stanhope," said Lily, a little diffidently, "do you suppose dear Irma will be—will be ——"

"Accused of murdering Wyatt," supplied Serena. "Why mince words, Lily? This is the day of frank speaking. And, anyway, it's better to face a situation boldly than to evade or avoid it. What do you think, Mark?"

Stanhope controlled his fierce anger and lowered the lids over his flaming eyes. It was better to answer these women; also, he must be careful to say only what he wished to have quoted.

"Hardly that," he said, and succeeded in speaking lightly. "It seems a strange coincidence that Irma's two husbands should die under such similar conditions, but, to my mind, it simply proves both deaths the work of some fiendish enemy or homicidal maniac who pulled off both stunts."

"Then all we have to do is to find the maniac," said Serena, rising to go. "I hope Irma will let Ray Booth take up the matter; he's a genius at detective work. Come along, Mark, are you going to see me home? Irma won't appear again to-night."

"Why won't she? It isn't dinner-time yet."

"No, she won't," declared Lily. "She'll have

something on a tray in her room, if, indeed, the poor dear will eat at all."

For some reason it jarred on Stanhope to hear Lily's "poor dear," and he concluded he'd rather go home than listen to any more of it. So he went off with Serena, who gave him much good advice as they walked along, and if it went in one ear and out of the other, at least some few bits of it fastened themselves in his brain. And one was that unless he was a little more moderate in his methods and language, he might easily injure Irma's cause more than he helped it.

For, said the learned Serena, quoting her favorite bard:

"We may outrun by violent swiftness that which we run at,
And lose by over-running."

Mark pondered on this, and then said he understood and agreed.

"Which is why," he went on, "I think I'll get a really big detective. Booth is all very well for small matters, but this is a crisis. I know of a chap who would be just all right, if I can get him."

"Better have Ray in the meantime, then. Can't let the grass grow under your feet, you know."

"And that's so, too. Guess I'll drop in on him now."

"Don't tell him about your expert, or he'll refuse to have anything to do with it."

"I'll take you home first, Lady fair, and then I'll

see him, and I'll be guided by my judgment as to what course to pursue."

"That is, assuming that you have any judgment worth being guided by," was the tart response. Serena had not much opinion of minds younger than her own.

But Stanhope was good-natured and took no offense at her chaff.

Meantime, Irma Steele was solacing herself with the gentle, innocent affection of her baby girl.

"Pitty Mummy," said Pansy Ann, fondling Irma's face. "Oo kyin', Mummy?"

"Oh, no—no, dear," and Irma wiped away the few tears that were the result of the sight of the baby rather than grief at her own troubles.

They had a frolic together then, and no one seeing the smiling mother and the laughing baby would have dreamed that in the mother's heart was the very anguish of despair.

In that heart was ringing a song of terror, words of dire portent. Between her and the prattle of the little girl, there sounded in her ears:

"Till ice shall flame and snow shall burn ——"

And on and on, to the dread finis ——

"And the life of the youngest Dercia ends."

"Miss Pansy is all right, isn't she, Nurse?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Right as a trivet. I never knew a healthier child."

"Thank God," breathed Irma, grateful for her one blessing, at least.

She stayed while her daughter was bathed and put to bed, and then, with a last good night kiss, she left her, feeling as if she were leaving Sanctuary for a return to the fires of Avernus.

But, as she traversed the way to her own room, she forced herself to assume a more cheerful presence, even though it was in no way a mirror of her disturbed and despairing soul.

Lily awaited her, sitting in the lovely boudoir, where the shaded lights and fresh flowers made an alluring picture.

"Now, if you'd get into negligé and rest a bit, then have a cozy bit of dinner, I think you'd be ripe for a good night's sleep," was Lily's suggestion, and though her impulse was to laugh aloud at this speech, Irma refrained for two reasons. First, she had no wish to hurt Lily's feelings, but more potent was the fear that if she let herself laugh once she would go straight into hysterics.

Calm though she was, Irma was exercising a terrible repression over her emotions, and she suddenly became aware that she could stand Lily only a short time longer, for that evening at least. So she acquiesced in the arrangement, and allowed Netta to select a negligé for her.

Careless of convention, Netta chose oriental lounging pajamas of most gorgeous coloring, and Irma donned them, scarcely knowing what she was putting on.

When her tray was brought, she found, to her surprise, that things tasted very good, and she ate more than Lily had dared hope.

But, these rites over, Irma insisted that she be at once put to bed and left undisturbed until morning, unless she rang.

For hours she lay on her bed, not only wide awake, but with every sense keyed up to the highest tension. Her thoughts at first ran riot, then assumed more clarity, and finally she found herself thinking rationally and planning rapidly.

Her mind flew back to Algeciras—to that first day, with Carlos. His plea for her to stay—to stay as his bride, his love. Beautiful Carlos—handsome as a young god, alluring as a faun, passionate as only a Spanish lover can be.

Dusk falling, the sea darkening, the—the flower scents—the music, faintly heard from wailing violins—"Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo"—and Carlos' voice close to her ear, now murmuring the words of the song, now whispering other words—for her alone ——

And, reviewing it all—all her life there—she came at last to the tragedy, the awful death of Carlos—the nightmare of her own arrest, the trial, the narrowly achieved acquittal and her sudden, necessary flight ——

Ah, God, must she go through those horrors again? And here, in an English-speaking land, where she could be arraigned and questioned by those who could understand her own words, as those Spaniards

could not do. It wasn't fair! No woman ought to be put through that crucible twice!

And the result—up here? Might it not be different? Well, what if it were? Would she care much? Only for Pansy Ann—and Mark.

Yes, she loved Mark, but the chances of her ever being free to marry him seemed vague and shadowy. She couldn't anyway. No woman, tried twice for murdering her husbands, ought to dream of marrying a third time! She almost laughed out at this. But, no, she must not laugh out—she must not! If she did she would go into hysterics—she knew it—and that way madness lay!

She must think of something else. For now it was midnight ——

Pansy Ann, for choice. Pansy Ann—the youngest Dercia—oh, God, what was that?

Across her ceiling floated the pale light that so frightened her. Yes, it was a light, a soft glow that moved slowly—very slowly across the frescoes. And then it faded, and all was dark again.

Breathlessly she listened, fearing, yet knowing what would follow.

Yes—there it came—soft, wailing notes:

“Noches claras dea romas y luna ——”

“Clear moonlit nights—filled with sorrow ——”

Unearthly music. The product, of course, of her own disordered brain. Was she going mad? No, she was quiet—unafraid now—but what could be the explanation? Carlos haunting her, of course—at

midnight—the ghosts' high noon. Carlos, with his Spanish songs and his passionate love—he said he would haunt her if she married again. But she *had* to marry again. She had to marry Wyatt. That was imperative, inevitable. She did, and now she had killed Wyatt—just as she had killed Carlos.

Well? There it was again:

“Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo ——”

Chapter VIII

*"He hated cold, inspecting,
Official men in blue,
Who pass their lives detecting
The crimes that others do."*

W. S. GILBERT.

IT WAS nearly morning before Irma fell into a troubled sleep, from which she was awakened by Netta's touch on her shoulder.

"Mr. Stanhope is calling, madam," the maid said, "and he wants very much to see you."

"Very well," Irma said, calmly; "get me ready at once. No, not black—something white."

"This crapy de cheeny, then," suggested Netta, who loved extra syllables.

Very dignified and self-reliant Irma looked in the severely simple gown, and, declaring she wanted no breakfast, she went down to greet Mark, who eagerly awaited her.

"Awfully sorry to show up so early," he said, "but I had to get here before the troublesome callers begin."

They went to the sun-parlor, and, sternly repressing his longing to take her in his arms, he sat near her and began to talk.

"First of all, dear, let it be understood that I love you and you are my promised wife. But those matters must wait till later, not out of any respect for

Wyatt's memory, but merely because we have our hands full to take care of your interests—your safety."

"Safety?"

"Yes. You're in a bad hole, I fear. The town is full of rumors and gossip, and the police are just fools enough to believe everything they hear."

"But what can they hear? What are people saying? Of course, I know, they're saying I murdered Wyatt, but can't they investigate and find out who really did do it?"

"Irma, listen to me. I want to put this on record. I don't for one minute believe you killed Steele, or your first husband, either, but if you did, I love you just the same. Understand that, and then we'll go on. Just the same—see?"

Irma shivered as if with an unnamed dread.

"It can't be just the same, Mark. I didn't do any killing, but I can't escape, this time. The other time I just barely got free. There was some one helped out—I don't know who it was, some friend of Carlos' I think. I thought only of getting out of the country and getting back to America. Mark, I've had more than my share of trouble ——"

"We'll make up for it later on. Now, to business. Keep your head up, dear, and we'll win out somehow. I went to see Booth last night, after I left you."

"What did he say?"

"He says he can't think of taking on the case professionally, or in a business way, for he's merely an

amateur and has no standing whatever. But he says he'll be glad to help in any way he can. He's ready to confer and advise and to use any detective ability he may possess. I told him to come along and do what they call spade work, and I'm going to get a big detective to attend to the case proper. A real detective—one of the fancy ones, you know. Fleming Stone, for choice, and if I can't snare him, then the next best."

"Did Ray Booth like the idea of doing what you call 'spade work'?"

"No, not much. But he wouldn't conduct the whole thing, so he has to play second fiddle. I showed him that, and he said he'd come over and talk to you. I'd leave him out of it entirely, but I want somebody to carry on until I can get Stone. There's so much in first effort—I mean, working while the affair is fresh."

"Who could have done it, Mark? Who could have poisoned Wyatt?"

Stanhope looked at her curiously.

"Their name is legion," he said, lightly. "It might have been any of us who were at the Sunday night supper; it might be any of the servants; it might be some rank outsider, who contrived to slip into the house, maybe into the kitchen and poison the food; it might have been an errand boy or delivery clerk, perhaps the innocent tool of the villain."

"You are assuming a villain—the authorities will assume—me."

"Yes, darling, they will. They do. That's why I

want you to be very careful of what you say. Don't talk too much."

"'The Whoosh' came again last night," Irma said, suddenly, as if not heeding his talk.

"What, that music nonsense? Dreams are the children of an idle brain. Though I'm sure yours was not idle last night. But forget it—don't bother about that imaginary song, when we have real troubles to meet and vanquish."

"How do you explain it? There was a dim, faint light, then that disappeared, and soon I heard the softest, sweetest strains of music—the Spanish song of 'Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo'——."

"Imagination, stimulated by memories of the past and—the stupefaction of the present."

"No, whatever it was, it was not imagination."

"Well, whatever it was, it *had* to be imagination."

Stanhope spoke banteringly, but he watched her closely. As he had anticipated, there came into her eyes that determined look, that in anyone else he would have called stubborn, and which was really the correct word for it.

But she dropped the subject of the music, and said, with a little sigh, "When is Mr. Booth coming?"

"About eleven. And I suppose those wretched police people will bump in."

"And I've asked Mr. Fenn to come over."

"I know, but why? Why don't you stick to Wilcox—Steele's own lawyer?"

Irma's pallor suddenly disappeared and a dark flush rose to her brow.

"I'll tell you, Mark. I want you to know everything. And, too, you ought to know it. You see, Mr. Wilcox has Wyatt's will."

"Yes."

"And with that will was inclosed a note stating that if he, Wyatt, should die in any suspicious circumstances, the matter must be looked into, and—especially with regard to my possible guilt—and yours."

"Mine."

"Yes. Wyatt wrote that we cared for one another, and might—as he expressed it—'do him in.'"

"Oh, my poor darling! The brute, to add to your troubles like that! I wish he had left out your name and merely directed attention to myself! Irma, will you go away? Secretly, I mean. Leave me here to take the brunt of the charges and you take the child and go off by yourself."

"Wouldn't that be tantamount to a confession?"

"I don't care, if it would get you away from this nest of horrors. I can't have you at the mercy of police and town gossips and secret enemies—for there must be such, somewhere. Go, dear, won't you?"

"No, Mark," and she smiled at him. "No, I'm not that sort. I couldn't show the white feather to that extent, nor could I desert you. We're in this thing together, and together we'll brave it out."

"There's no fear for me. Wyatt just put that in to make it harder ——"

"Don't be too sure. You know those police people are ready to jump at any hint. If they get word of that note they'll arrest us both."

"Is Wilcox going to hand it over to them?"

"I don't know. He said he'd not mention it—but that was when he thought Wyatt had died a natural death. Oh, why couldn't Doctor Campbell have let the matter alone? If he had just given his certificate for liver trouble, all would have been well."

"Did it happen the same way in Algeciras?"

"Almost exactly. The doctor diagnosed it as yellow atrophy of the liver; and after Carlos died, he turned around and said he had been poisoned!"

"The two men were ill the same way?"

"Exactly the same way. Every symptom, every condition was exactly the same."

"Irma, don't you see, that proves a conspiracy of some sort? You didn't do it; it couldn't be coincidence; somebody is trying to fasten those two deaths on you!"

"It may seem so to you, Mark, but you know that a jury would far sooner believe that I simply committed the two—murders. It's far more plausible."

"This is useless talk, Irma." Mark was very white and his eyes glittered. "I'm going straight to New York, and I'm going to get Fleming Stone, if I have to kidnap him. He can get to the bottom of this mystery and nobody else can. When Booth

comes, tell him all the truth. It's foolish to hide anything. Then, when Stone comes, he can work in with Booth, and if they can't get along together, Booth can drop out. So tell Ray all, but be close-mouthed with the police. Don't make any misstatements, of course, and don't openly evade an issue. But say only what you have to, and don't volunteer any information. Do you trust Lily Mersereau?"

"I don't trust anybody but you. Oh, yes, and Serena. Good gracious, who's that?"

A bent, stooping figure drew near them, and Irma saw it was old Mother Mullins.

"I can't see you now, Mrs. Mullins," she said, speaking gently. "Please go away until some other time."

"No, ma'am. Not till I've said my say. You're under a curse, ma'am, you know."

Irma shivered. "Yes," she said, in a low tone, "I know."

"You know where that curse will fall."

The old crone's voice was hollow and raucous, like a raven's note. Her wizened old face was sinister, and her beady black eyes darted from one to the other of the troubled pair before her.

"I know," Irma said, in a dull whisper.

"Then let me take her away. No other plan can save the child. Give her to me. I'll care for her."

Stanhope listened in mute astonishment. Could they be speaking of Pansy Ann? That flower-faced baby—to be given over to this miserable old witch!

"No," Irma said, after a moment; "no, Mrs. Mullins, I can't consent to that."

"Then, the Curse will fall—will fall—and soon."

She hobbled away, muttering unintelligible words, and Irma with difficulty kept back her tears. She dared not let them come, for she knew a storm of sobs would follow, and she must meet many people to-day.

"What is it all about?" asked Mark, quietly. "Do you want to tell me?"

"Just one more horror," said Irma, wearily. "It is the Curse of the Dercias. An old curse, pronounced on the family many, many years ago. It seems that the old Spanish line was to be kept entirely Spanish. And one marrying a foreigner was subject to opprobrium and disaster. But especially was the Curse effective if a Dercia married a woman with fair hair. It runs like this:

" 'Till ice shall flame and snow shall burn
No power the Dercia Curse may turn.
If that a Dercia ever dare
To wed a maid with ashen hair,
The Dercia Curse descends—descends ——
And the life of the youngest Dercia ends.' "

"Pansy Ann is the youngest Dercia to-day. Carlos married me, and I have ashen hair. So, if the Curse is a true one, my baby's life is forfeit. Mother Mullins has told me before if I will let her take the child to keep for me, she will be safe.—But how can I give Pansy over to that dreadful creature?"

"You can't. Don't think of it for a moment. And that curse is all poppycock! Forget it. How did that old woman come to know about the Curse at all?"

"I've no idea where she found out about it. I've told nobody, except of course, Wyatt."

"Don't tell anybody else. And forget it yourself. And don't dream of giving up your baby to anybody. You're crazy to think of it. You must go carefully, dear. We can't have a nervous breakdown, you know. Let me save you from that, at least."

And his firm handclasp was so invigorating and so sane, that Irma shook off her superstitious fears, at least for the moment.

So Stanhope went away, and Fenn came.

To Irma's surprise, Austin Fenn seemed in no wise anxious to have her for a client.

He claimed he was a very busy man; he suggested that others could better look after her; he said that since Wilcox had been Steele's lawyer, he was the very man for the place.

At last Irma said, "I gather you don't want to be mixed up in my affairs."

At this Austin Fenn looked decidedly embarrassed.

"Oh, don't misjudge me," he said, in a perfunctory way.

"I'm not," returned Irma, simply. "It isn't hard to grasp your meaning. You don't know just what is ahead of me, and you'd rather stay out of the uncertainty. You fear, too, it might react on your other clients."

The embarrassment evident in Fenn's face proved the correctness of her assumptions.

Usually past-master in the art of hiding his thoughts, just now he seemed perturbed, almost rattled.

"And then, too," Irma went on, "you are a beneficiary under my husband's will. Yet, I don't quite see why that should turn you against me."

"I am not turned against you, Mrs. Steele. But I can't help feeling that you should continue with Mr. Wilcox as your lawyer. He is worthy in every respect ——"

"I am not asking you, Mr. Fenn, to recommend a legal advisor. I asked you to look after my affairs yourself. You do not care to do so—there is no more to be said."

Irma's air of finality was unmistakable, and, looking decidedly uncomfortable, Fenn rose to go. Soon after that Ray Booth came.

Irma had thought of summoning Lily for this conference, but she concluded she would rather be alone with her visitor. Booth came in with a cheerful, almost a jaunty air, but Irma, with quick suspicion, felt sure this was an assumed pose to put her at her ease.

"This is kind of you, Mr. Booth," she began, "but I can't let you take on the case unless we put matters on a business basis."

"Meaning as regards payment, I suppose," he said, smiling at her. "Well, let's not bother about that side of it just now. If I prove of real help, I

will accept a small honorarium, but if I am unable to make any headway, I must not expect remuneration. I'm not a lawyer, who must have a retainer. I'm just a friend, who chances to have a trace of the detective instinct, or who thinks he has. Now, will you tell me all you care to, and remember, the more you tell me the better I can work."

Grateful for this pleasant attitude, in such sharp contrast to Fenn's unwilling air, Irma declared herself ready to tell anything he wanted to know.

"But you'd better ask me questions," she suggested. "For I've never talked with a detective and I've no idea what I ought to say first."

"Oh, first of all, you must say, 'Why, you don't look at all like I fancied a detective would look!' That's the proper opening."

Irma laughed out, in spite of herself. The man's smile was infectious, and he had an air of self-confidence that was attractive. A good-looking man, without being really distinguished in appearance, Ray Booth had a pleasing personality and a charming voice.

"But you see," she returned, "I never even imagined a detective. I don't read mystery stories, and I am deeply sorry to find myself involved in a real one."

She was grave now, and Booth was, too.

"Remember always, Mrs. Steele," he said, "that I am not a professional detective. But I want to help. So, as you suggest, I will ask questions. Do you think, or assume, that your husband could have

taken the poison into his system at the time of our Sunday night supper?"

"I must think that he could have done so. But there are other possibilities, of course."

"Such as?"

"There are a great many servants. I have no definite reason to suspect any of them, but I would rather suspect them than my guests."

"Of course. Anybody else?"

"Only stray callers, messengers, delivery boys and such."

"But they would have no motive."

"No, unless they were emissaries of some higher-up person."

"Oh, that, of course. The field is too wide for speculation. You can think of no motive for such a deed? No enemy or disgruntled friend?"

"Wyatt Steele was not a young man. He had practiced law a long time. It would be strange if he had not incurred some one's enmity at some time."

"True enough. Now, Mrs. Steele, as you can readily understand, even if you don't read mystery stories, this is not an ordinary case. I mean, not in the usual line of plots, where there is a weapon to be considered and various other clues from which the truth may be deduced. Here, there is no weapon. If poison was administered, it was done at least thirty-six hours before death ensued. There can be no clues, because there is no certainty, no suspicion even, as to where the fatal draught was taken. How, then, look for clues? No, we must work on different

lines. Let us look into the past. You came here to Kavanagh, a widow?"

"Yes, last May."

"And then you married Mr. Steele in October. May I ask what brought about a wedding so soon? Was it love at first sight?"

Determined not to be offended at this necessary procedure, Irma answered quietly, "Not exactly, no. I wanted Mr. Steele to take care of my affairs—legal and business matters. He declared he would do so, only on condition that I marry him. This I consented to do."

"A high-handed piece of business for a lawyer!"

"Mr. Steele was what is called a high-handed man. I married him and I never regretted doing so."

"You were not sufficiently in his confidence for him to tell you of any enemies he had—desperate enemies?"

"He never told me of any such."

"We must find them then. For it stands to reason only a desperate enemy would connive to bring about his death. Another thing, Mrs. Steele, poison is usually conceded to be a woman's weapon. Very seldom is poison used by a man. Try to think of some woman who might have desired to put an end to Wyatt Steele."

Irma blanched, but bravely faced the music.

"Mr. Booth," she said, "I am suspected of giving my husband that poison. If a woman is looked for, I shall be the first to be accused."

"You don't mean it!" Ray Booth stared at her. "Why do you say a thing like that?"

At that moment Wicks announced the arrival of Mr. Wilcox.

"Come in," Irma said, instantly deciding on a showdown. "I am glad of your arrival, Mr. Wilcox. Mr. Booth is discussing with me the matter of my husband's death. Before we proceed, may I ask if you have any intention of making public the note that you found attached to Mr. Steele's will?"

"I fear," Wilcox spoke deprecatingly, "I very much fear, I shall have to do so."

"Then, I direct that you show it now, or tell Mr. Booth what that note said."

"Why Mr. Booth?" and Wilcox looked at him wonderingly.

"Because he is going to investigate the case. Mr. Wilcox, I did not kill Wyatt Steele, nor was I instrumental in doing so, nor do I know who did do it. Therefore, I am depending on my innocence for my exculpation, and I order you to make known the contents of that note."

"But—but, this is most—most unpleasant——"

"It is," said Irma, "decidedly unpleasant. Do as I asked, please."

"I can't—really, Mrs. Steele, I can't bring myself to ——"

"Very well, I will do it myself. Mr. Booth, in Mr. Wilcox's possession, attached to Mr. Steele's will, is a note stating that if he, Mr. Steele, should come to his death other than by natural means, he

requested that investigation be made with a view toward proving the criminal to be myself."

"Or ——" began Wilcox.

"Be silent," said Irma, sternly. "You had a chance to tell of this and you refused. Therefore you have no right to add to or alter my story of the note."

Wilcox gasped at this fine exhibition of feminine logic and reasoning, but he said no more on the subject. Booth's quick eyes darted from one to the other, but he asked no further questions about the note.

"The matter stands here," he said, slowly. "It seems inevitable that Mrs. Steele must be suspected of poisoning her husband. I take it, you are with me, Mr. Wilcox, in proving that this is a false suspicion."

"Why, yes—but I don't see just what I can do to help."

"You don't!" Booth fairly shouted at the lawyer. "Then I'll tell you what you can do! You can burn up that note! A dastardly performance! Writing a note throwing suspicion on his own wife! Are you sure it's genuine?"

"Certain, Mr. Booth," returned Wilcox, who was as cool as the other was excited.

"Then all the more reason to destroy it. You know it to be a lie, Mr. Wilcox. You know this lady is incapable of such a deed ——"

"I have unbounded respect and admiration for Mrs. Steele," Wilcox averred, "but I can't say I

know my client's note to be unworthy of consideration. It can't be termed a lie, for it makes no statement—merely advises an investigation. And as the investigation is even now being set in motion by the police, your emphatic command to burn the note is somewhat out of place."

"Not at all. You know yourself that the police can find no evidence against Mrs. Steele, but were they given that note, their minds would be made up at once that Mrs. Steele is the guilty person and they would act accordingly. Whereas, there is, there *must* be a real criminal somewhere, and he must be found. Come now, Wilcox, in the cause of humanity, give me that note and let me destroy it."

"No, Mr. Booth, I cannot do anything of the sort. But I will point out to you that if I did give it to you, and if you did burn it, it would make no difference. Were I to tell the police of it, they would not doubt my word, and results would be quite the same as if they saw the note itself."

And both his hearers knew this to be the truth.

Chapter IX

*"The sterling rule of common sense
Now reaps its proper recompense."*

W. S. GILBERT.

IT WAS Thursday morning before Stanhope could gain audience with Fleming Stone. He had stayed in New York overnight, determined to be right on the job. And at ten o'clock he was keeping an appointment at the detective's apartment in the East Seventies.

He was shown into a large, comfortable room that was a library or study. He was in a mood half despairing and half belligerent, ready to lean to either side according to the temper of the man he was about to interview.

Stone came into the room and, with a word of pleasant greeting, waited for the visitor to state his business.

Stanhope looked at the great detective.

Tall, rather thin, well-dressed and of easy, agreeable manner, Stone, nevertheless showed decidedly that he expected his caller to come to the point at once. Sensing this, Mark did so.

"I've been told, Mr. Stone," he began, "that you take on cases that appeal to you as being unusual or of unusual interest."

"That is, in the main, correct," Stone returned,

his dark, deep-set eyes concentrating their gaze on Stanhope's face.

"And the case I bring you, the case I want to urge you to take up, is of unusual interest because of its peculiar circumstances."

"Don't waste words, Mr. Stanhope. Tell me, as briefly as possible, the outstanding points of this unusual affair."

"Briefly, then, a gentle, cultured woman is accused of poisoning two husbands successively, in precisely the same manner."

"Not entirely unusual, so far."

Determined to enlist the man's interest, Mark spoke rapidly.

"But, in both cases, the man died, after less than two days' illness of what the doctors diagnosed as yellow atrophy of the liver, and in both cases it was later proved that the cause of death was the administration of phosphorus."

"Yes, the symptoms and effects would be identical."

"Just so. Now, Mr. Stone, no woman is going to be fool enough to cut up that trick a second time. In the first instance, she was tried and acquitted. Is she going to try it again?"

"Hard to say. Murderers often use the same means over and over. It is proverbial. But, is it certain that this woman was guilty the first time?"

"It is certain that she was not ——"

"In your opinion?"

"Yes. I make no secret of the situation. I love

her, and I shall marry her as soon as possible. But she is in a tight place. The police know of the death of her first husband, and therefore are ready to condemn her at once for the death of her second."

"This is the Wyatt Steele case?"

"Yes. Do you know all about it?"

"Only what I've read in the papers. Not much, and nothing definite. I agree with you that the case is interesting if Mrs. Steele is innocent. If not, then it is a commonplace affair."

"It is difficult for me to convince you of her innocence, for anything I could say you would set down to my prejudice in her behalf. So, let me beg of you to take the case. You may set your own price, use your own methods, take your own time, if you'll only give us the benefit of your judgment and skill."

"There are, I daresay, many side issues, ramifications and contradictory clues?"

"Side issues, yes, I suppose so. But clues—none at all that I know of. You see, there's been nobody to find clues. The police are going on the theory that she poisoned her first husband, so, of course, she poisoned her second."

"And you expect to be her third?"

"I certainly do, as soon as it can be brought about. You see, I know her better than the police can, and I know she is as innocent as an angel from heaven. Now, I want you to come along and prove that, beyond all shadow of doubt on the part of anybody."

"Describe her to me, in the fewest possible words."

"Dignified, calm, high-minded, a devoted mother, a loyal and reliable friend."

"Artistic temperament?"

"Not at all. Practical, common sense, a first-rate housekeeper and a delightful and capable hostess."

"I'll take the case. When shall I go up there?"

Mark Stanhope felt his breath taken away. What had he said to cause this sudden decision? However, the decision had been given, and apparently in good faith, for Fleming Stone was smiling at him, and awaiting an answer to his question.

"Oh—why—as soon as you can arrange it. Will you stay at the Inn? It's very comfortable, and—I'd ask you to visit me, but—I live with my mother, and she's easily put about——"

"Moreover, she doesn't like your affair with Mrs. Steele. Don't bother to explain. Certainly I'll go to the Inn. I'd prefer it, anyway. Now, Mr. Stanhope, it may be we have a chance right here and now, that will be hard to get again. Suppose you tell me all you know about the case. Omit nothing, especially anything about Mrs. Steele. Don't think to benefit her cause by holding back bits of information that you may deem prejudicial to her interests. Often those are most helpful to my work on the matter."

So Stanhope carefully and conscientiously told the whole story as he knew it. His tale was a trifle disjointed, for as he proceeded, he realized there were gaps he could not bridge and points on which

he knew next to nothing. But he told of the supper party, and of the mysterious music heard in the night. He told of the promise of Carlos Dercia to haunt Irma if she married again, and he told of the Curse of the Dercias.

"The lady was born in Kansas, I believe?"

"Yes, in a small town there."

"And, longing to see life, went off with the statement that she was going to find a husband for herself."

"You state it crudely, Mr. Stone. After you have met Mrs. Steele, you will learn that she could not have put it like that. But it is true that the young men of her home town did not meet with her entire approval, and she hoped to find her true romance while on her foreign journey. As I have heard her say, many a girl feels like that, but few would say so, or would take steps toward the fulfillment of her wishes."

"Well said, Mr. Stanhope. I apologize for my seeming lack of appreciation of the lady's character, and I will say no more until I have met her. I can take the case at once, as I have nothing on hand that I can't leave. Give me an hour to pack up a bit, and I will go at once to Kavanagh. If you're going now, engage for me a couple of good rooms, and I'll be along about lunch-time."

"Good for you!" cried Mark, impulsively, his eyes shining as he grasped the detective's hand. "I'll go ahead, then, unless you'd rather I'd wait for you."

"No, go on. My chauffeur will run me up, and I may or may not keep my car."

"You can have mine whenever you want it, if it will save you trouble."

"Well, we'll see. Good-bye, for now. Tell Mrs. Steele I'll call on her early this afternoon. And, if you have any influence with her, advise her to be entirely frank with me. There's nothing makes so much trouble as withholding information."

"Oh, by the way, she has a friend, with the 'detective instinct' helping her—Ray Booth. Know him?"

"No. We detectives don't all know one another."

Though Stone's face was grave, Mark thought he sensed a slight smile hovering around the thin, sensitive lips.

"Oh, he isn't a detective. Just an amateur and a friend. Don't snub him."

"Mr. Stanhope! As if I would!" Stone was really smiling now, and Mark smiled, too.

"Oh, well, I had to tell you. And Ray's a good fellow."

"All right, I'll be careful of his feelings. Good-bye."

Stanhope hurried off and hurried back to Kavanagh.

He was neglecting his business, but he paid small heed to that. He was doing something for Irma, and he had secured Stone's services, and surely he would find out the truth.

A fearful thought passed through his mind as

to whether Fleming Stone might find out truths better left unfound—but he quashed this as being tinged with a sort of disloyalty to Irma. No truth could work against her interests—nothing derogatory to her could by any possibility be the truth! which goes to show that Mark's love and loyalty were greater than his discretionary powers.

He went at once to "The Oriels" on his arrival in Kavanagh, but found it difficult to get a word with Irma. The house seemed to be full of people there on various businesses.

Lily and Wicks, the butler, were closeted with the undertaker's men, arranging for the funeral, which was to be held that afternoon, and which Irma refused to discuss, or consider in any way.

Inspector Culliss was with Irma, and, there ostensibly to tell her that the inquest would be held the next morning, he was taking the occasion to quiz her some more as to her past life and her present situation.

Ray Booth was also at this conference, but he did little to help. Indeed, there seemed to be nothing he could do. Since Fenn had practically refused to act as Irma's lawyer, she had no one in view for that office save Wilcox. And while he was all right as a capable and efficient counsel, Irma hesitated to have him meet the police lest he tell them of the note left with Steele's will. For all she knew, Wilcox might have done this already, but it was improbable as Culliss said nothing about it.

At last, Stanhope insisted on breaking in upon

this confab, and, braving the Inspector's disapproval, he sat down beside Irma.

"They have arranged matters," Irma told him. "The funeral will be this afternoon at four o'clock, and the inquest to-morrow morning at eleven."

"All right," Mark returned, calmly. "Fleming Stone will be here for both ceremonies."

"Oh, is he coming?" cried Irma, and both Culliss and Ray Booth looked their interest.

"Yes, he's taking the case," said Mark, exultantly. "He won't bother you, Ray, he's quite willing to work with you."

"Oh, that's all right," Booth returned; "I've no petty vanity. But there's no sense in my keeping on with a man like that at the helm."

"Well, talk it over with him," Stanhope said, carelessly.

"He's a great man," the Inspector said, heavily. "A man with a big reputation, but he can't get ahead of the police. We have a lot of first-hand information, and where's he going to get anything of that sort? This isn't a case where the smarty-cat detective says, 'The murder was committed by a man five feet, eight inches tall, with a derby hat and a broken shoelace and he smokes a pipe. Also, he stutters and has one crooked finger.'"

But this feeble and somewhat trite bit of witticism called forth no applause from his audience, and Culliss subsided. Repeating his announcement as to the inquest and directing them all to be present, the Inspector stalked off.

Booth remained a few moments and then Rita Delano appeared.

"I had to come over, Irma, dearest," she said, kissing her, "for I so hoped I could do something to help you. Will the funeral be here, at the house?"

"No," Irma said, "I preferred to have it at the church. But the inquest will be here, to-morrow. You must come to that."

"Why must I?"

"They want all of us who were at the Sunday night party," Booth told her. "A mere formality, of course, but a necessary one, I suppose."

"Not necessary at all," said Rita, petulantly. "I hate anything of that sort."

"Don't fuss, Rita," Booth advised her. "You'll have to come, so you may as well come willingly."

"Oh, very well, it means nothing. How are you, Irma?"

"I'm all right. Not especially happy, but not at all ill."

"Plucky girl," and Rita looked at her admiringly.

"I have to be," Irma said; "pluck is the only thing I have to fall back on."

"I say, Irma," Rita went on, "don't you want me to take Pansy Ann for a few days ——"

"Mercy, no! What would you do that for?"

"Well, she may be in the way ——"

"In the way! What are you talking about? She has her own rooms, in the East wing. She's entirely shut off from the rest of the house. Nurse is

with her —— Rita, you must be crazy! Oh—I wish you'd go away! I can't stand anything more. Make them all go, Mark, and you go too. Go! Or I'll lose my mind!"

Without a word, Rita and Ray Booth left the room, and at an imperious nod from Irma, Mark followed them. Concluding it wisest to obey her, Mark went out of the house with the others, and then their ways separated.

Stanhope didn't put too great stress on Irma's outburst, for he felt sure it was simply because she was under too great a strain and was near the breaking-point.

The excitement of the funeral arrangements, the inquest arrangements, the nagging of the Inspector, the annoyance of Rita's request to take the child away, and the whole general situation was too much for the nerves of any woman, and the marvel was that Irma didn't go to pieces utterly.

Mark went over to the Inn to be there when Stone arrived. This end he accomplished and was rejoiced to find that Stone was greatly pleased with the rooms set aside for him, and was also eager and alert to be on the case.

"I think, Stanhope," he said, when they were alone, "there is some chicanery going on."

"I'm sure of that; can you dig into it?"

"I hope so. Now, when can I see Mrs. Steele?"

"The funeral is at four this afternoon. Want a short conference, say, at two or two-thirty?"

"Yes, as a preliminary. I may have to see her

again this evening. If the inquest is to-morrow, we must be ready for it."

"All right, I'll telephone her, and let you know. Can I go along?"

"No, please. It's an important matter, this first interview, and I think you'd queer my pitch."

"All right, just as you say."

So the hour was arranged, and two-thirty saw Fleming Stone in the sun-parlor at "The Oriels," sitting opposite a gracious-looking woman in a white gown, with a face even whiter.

He studied the face for a moment, a bit uncertain how best to begin his conversation.

At last he spoke, saying gently, "Are you willing to tell me everything, Mrs. Steele?"

She, in her turn, gazed at him a moment in silence. She saw a grave expression on the wise, kindly face, but it was the look of pity in the deep, dark eyes that made her feel that she could give this man her whole confidence.

"Yes," she said, slowly, but with no touch of uncertainty, "yes, Mr. Stone, I will tell you everything. Do you think you can help me?"

"Let us think so, surely, until forced to think otherwise. Now, to go far back in your life, you were dissatisfied with the opportunities offered for happiness in your restricted environment?"

"Just exactly that, Mr. Stone. I longed to see the world, to see people who could interest me, sights that could delight me, and to have experiences that would thrill me. Also, I had a normal desire for a

husband and children, and I made the mistake of saying so to people who misconstrued my words. They deemed me an adventuress—perhaps I was, but only in the sense of one avid for adventure, not in the more widely accepted meaning of the term.”

“I quite understand, Mrs. Steele, and absolve you of any and all blame for your longing to get away or for your expression of it.”

A smile had crept into his eyes, and Irma warmed to the kindness in his glance. At any rate, she had passed that first stumbling-block—that confession of her mad impulses of youth, her foolish declaration of her plans.

“Now,” he went on, “our time is limited to-day. Also, the hours before the inquest to-morrow are not many and you will have people with you. There are some salient points on which I want information, so let us start with this. You had planned to go on to Naples?”

“Yes.”

“You left the steamer at Gibraltar?”

“Yes. There was a whole day’s wait there. Nearly all the passengers went ashore, and I went with the rest. From Gibraltar a small steamer ran over to Algeciras, and many of the tourists went on it. I had never seen Spain, and welcomed this opportunity for a glimpse of it. So I crossed to Algeciras. I was alone, and I found Algeciras a veritable Paradise. I had never seen anything half so lovely. I had lunch at a charming inn, surrounded by flowers and sunshine and the blue, dancing sea, and the heavenly

sky with drifting, fleecy clouds—oh, never was there such a scene!”

Irma paused a moment, her far-away gaze proving that memory held sway. She drew herself together, and, with no word of apology, continued:

“At luncheon, a young man sat at my table. He was charming, and he seemed to like me. With no thought beyond the present moment, we drifted into more and more intimate conversation, and I found at last a mind that responded to my own. I flung caution to the winds and we spent the afternoon together, rambling on the beach and among the gardens. It was all very simple and innocent and for the first time in my life I was happy.

“As it grew later he urged me to stay and dine with him, saying the steamer—the liner, I mean—didn’t sail till midnight.

“I stayed—I seemed to have no volition of my own—and during the dusky, flower-scented evening, we discovered we loved one another and could not bear the thought of parting. So we remained in the gardens of the inn, and, sitting under the trees, we could hear the strains from the orchestra playing in the Public Gardens not far away. They played ‘Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo’—do you know it?”

Stone nodded assent, and she went on:

“Then you know its sweet, haunting melody. We couldn’t resist it, and in answer to Carlos’ impassioned prayer that I stay there forever and become his wife, I gladly consented. Everything was arranged with utmost propriety. I stayed at the

inn until cables could be sent to ambassadors and marriage licenses obtained, and the whole affair was strictly legal and binding, if unconventional. I had no parents, and I was accountable to no one. You believe I am telling you the truth—so far, Mr. Stone?”

“I do, implicitly.”

“Well, then I lived there in Algeciras with Carlos Dercia for nearly two years.”

“You were happy with him?”

“Yes, on the whole. He had a furious temper, and he was kind and brutal by turns. It is a mistake to marry outside your own countrymen. But we were happy, and when my baby came I was blissfully satisfied. I had longed for a child, and my baby was the very flower of the universe. But you don't want to hear that sort of thing. What do you want—next?”

“The story of your husband's death, please.”

The look of exaltation passed from Irma's face, and she came back to the ugly realities of life.

“Yes,” she said, “yes. Well, I can tell you only what I know myself. I was alone with Carlos one night, and he awoke with most excruciating pains and cried out in agony. It was perhaps eight or ten hours since he had eaten anything, but I assumed, of course, it was an attack of acute indigestion. I did what I could with simple remedies, but he grew worse and I called a doctor. He said at first, it was gastro-enteritis, and did what he could to allay the pain. Next day, Carlos was better, but the following

night he had a return of the same symptoms, and died in convulsions.

"Now, this is the strange part. The doctor diagnosed it after death as yellow atrophy of the liver, and was about to give a burial certificate. But he got word somehow, I never knew how, to make a further investigation. A post mortem revealed that death was the result of phosphorus-poisoning, and I was accused of murder. I was arrested, jailed, and tried."

At this point Irma showed absolutely no agitation nor fear.

She looked Stone straight in the eye as she continued:

"I was tried, and I was acquitted, principally because I was a woman and the jury of Spanish men couldn't bring themselves to condemn me. But they said it was because of insufficient evidence, and that was doubtless also true. As soon as I could I came back to my own country. I changed the name of Carlos Dercia to Charles Darcy, which was merely anglicizing it. I came here to Kavanagh because it seemed like a pleasant, peaceful home, and I never dreamed of any trouble arising. But it has arisen."

"Yes, Mrs. Steele, it has arisen."

His voice struck a cold chill to Irma's heart.

"Then—then, Mr. Stone, the enemies who tried to make me seem a murderer in Algeciras have followed me here and have done the same thing again."

If Fleming Stone found this statement hard to

swallow, he did not say so. He asked, quietly, "Have you any idea of the identity of this enemy—or enemies?"

"Not the slightest. I know of no one in Kavanagh who in any way resembles the people I knew in Algeciras. Yet there must be some one, for I had no hand myself in the death of either of my two husbands."

"That is the truth, Mrs. Steele?"

"That is the absolute truth, Mr. Stone."

"Then, Mrs. Steele, you are in a most desperate predicament."

Chapter X

*"He lived on curds and whey
And daily sang their praises;
And then he'd go and play
With buttercups and daisies."*

W. S. GILBERT.

FLEMING STONE went away from his interview with Irma Steele, and walked back to the Inn with plenty to think about.

He was strongly inclined to place implicit faith in the story she had told him. Her words and manner carried conviction of her truthfulness, but, on the other hand, Stone had had too much experience with beautiful and plausible ladies to swallow everything they told him.

Irma Steele was a wonderful woman, he was quite ready to concede that, but she was so strong, so capable, so entirely mistress of herself and her affairs that he believed she could pull the wool over most men's eyes.

Yet, was she pulling wool? That, Stone knew, he had to determine for himself. On the merits of the case, or, perhaps better, demerits, she had a fairly black score chalked up against her.

It was a strange thing for her to do—to kill two husbands by the same means and in the same conditions—but it was even more strange to think of some enemy committing these two murders. So

Stone concluded he could form no opinions until he knew more details and had probed more fully into the intricacies of the matter.

He would go to the funeral that afternoon. He might learn something from the attitudes or behavior of the mourners. And then he would attend the inquest the next day, and surely at that he would get inside information of some sort.

He did not forget that he was working for Irma Steele, and his efforts and endeavors must all be toward her vindication. But if he learned anything that pointed indubitably to her guilt, he would have to give up the case.

He had not taken the main road to the Inn but had wandered through side streets and by-paths from preference. As he passed through a short lane, he saw a young man walking along with a shuffling, shambling step. His roving eyes of pale, watery blue betokened a lack of mentality, and, always sorry for that condition, Stone spoke to him kindly. "Where away, my friend?" he said.

"Nowhere, just nowhere," was the reply, in a gentle voice. "Any candy, you?"

"Why, no, I haven't any candy with me. Want some?"

"I do, oh, yes, I do. Candy or flowers."

"Come along, then, and I'll buy you whichever you want most. Choose, candy or flowers?"

They walked together toward the shopping district, and Stone looked curiously at the half-wit. The

lad was not bad-looking, save for the vacant, staring eyes. He was clean and neatly dressed.

"Don't shuffle so," admonished Stone. "Walk more firmly."

To his surprise, the youth straightened up and walked more steadily, but soon lapsed back to his shuffle.

"What is your name?" Stone asked him, and he replied, "Oscar Percy Mott. Nice name. Candy, now?"

"Candy or flowers. Which?"

"Not both?"

"Oh, no, not both."

"Flowers, then. Here's a shop."

They were passing a florist's, and, going in, Stone bought a bunch of spring blossoms, which he handed over to Mott. In an ecstasy of delight the boy laid his cheek against the flowers, but lightly, not to crush them. His eyes took on a spark of intelligence and he seemed transfigured by the contact of the soft petals.

"Well," Stone said, as they left the shop, "I guess you can have a bit of candy, too. Here's a confectioner's."

"You're a good man," Oscar observed, "who are you?"

"My name is Stone. You live over near the Steele place?"

"Yes, down below their garden. Oh, their garden! It is so beautiful in the summer days!"

"Do you know Mrs. Steele?"

"I have seen her a few times. I cannot say I know her. I know the little one."

"Her daughter?"

"Yes, a beauty baby. She—she likes me."

The last was said with a smile, half bashful, half wistful, and somehow Stone took a liking to the afflicted lad.

"Come on in," he continued, as they reached the candy shop. "Now what kind?"

"Only soft ones," stipulated Oscar. "My teeth are not so good. Marshmallows and Turkish paste."

"Those are certainly soft kinds," Stone agreed and bought for him a box of each.

"Now run along home," he said, feeling he had had enough of Mott's society.

"You believe in spirits?" said Oscar, as he turned to go.

"Well, no," Stone smiled. "Do you?"

"Me? Oh, no!" and with a cracked, almost demoniac chuckle, Oscar Percy ran off down the street.

"I wonder why," thought Stone, who always wondered why misfits were allowed in the eternal scheme of things. Then, dismissing the matter from his mind, he went on to the Inn and found Mark Stanhope there to escort him to the funeral.

Stone had the distaste for funerals that is found in so many people, but it was his only opportunity to look upon the face of Wyatt Steele, and though this might be of no particular help in his work, yet

he desired to see what manner of man he was, or had been. Also, he would see various friends and neighbors of the Steeles and get a bit of familiarity with the environment.

"I don't mind telling you, Mr. Stanhope, that we have a hard row to hoe."

"You believe all Mrs. Steele has told you, don't you?" asked Mark, quickly.

"I think I do, but if positive evidence should contradict any of her statements, what then?"

"Then disbelieve the positive evidence."

"Not if we want to make a good job of it all," said Stone, seriously. "I met that Mott in the town, that half-witted chap. Know him?"

"Only in a general way. Did he interest you?"

"His kind always interests me. Well, it's time we started."

The funeral passed off much as such affairs always do. There was a profusion of flowers, much beautiful music, the solemn service, the rustling congregation and the final benediction.

Stone sat through it all, his eyes riveted on the face of the newly made widow. What he saw there surprised him. There was a quite different expression from the one she had shown at his interview with her. Then, she had been strong, self-reliant, confident in a safe and sane way.

Now, she was alarmed. Not nervous or worried-looking—those terms could never be applied to Irma Steele—but surely she had lost poise, something had disturbed her calm assurance.

From where he sat, Stone could observe her without attracting notice, and he watched her closely.

It was the merest trifle that now and then drew his attention. A sudden spasm of dismay, if not despair, when her roving gaze rested on the man in the pew ahead of her. A trembling of the black-gloved finger that sought the page in her prayer-book. A quiver of the pale lips when they unconsciously framed the familiar responses. And a tremor of the whole body, promptly controlled by sheer will-power, when the time came to rise.

Yes, something had happened or some knowledge had come to her, that had frightened her. Poor woman! if innocent, how she must be suffering. And if guilty, suffering as much—or more.

A whispered word to Stanhope revealed the fact that the man ahead of her was Wilcox, the lawyer. A mean face, Stone thought—one to be trusted, perhaps, but not admired.

Of the others near Irma, though knowing none of them, he picked out Lily Mersereau as one to distrust, Serena Tenney as one to adore, and Rita Delano as an uncertain proposition. The men he made no attempt to classify, knowing he would meet them sooner or later.

The services over, he went for a long walk to think things out and arrange his thoughts in order. But he was not pleased at the result.

The first item he knew of Irma did not please him. He was far from being an old fogey, but it jarred to think of the girl starting off to Europe by

herself, with the announcement she would not return until she had achieved a husband and a child. Well, she had her way. The story of the day in Algeciras was believable enough, but he had only her word for it. Did she meet Dercia as she described? Did they marry? Why, of course they did, or how could she have been tried for the murder of her husband? And some one—she never knew who—brought about the question of her guilt, and so, made necessary the trial. A rum go, that! Well, some goes are rum. Stone kept an open mind, and allowed no prejudice for or against anybody to influence his judgment.

Then her return to the States, and her coming to Kavanagh. Why Kavanagh? But, on the other hand, why not?

Then, her quick, almost sudden, marriage to Steele. There was surely something back of that. For she was now in love with Mark Stanhope, and the situation was growing complicated.

But, and Stone sighed, he was not here to probe into the case, he was here at the behest of and to further the interests of Mrs. Steele. If evidence appeared that made it impossible for him to champion her cause, very well, he must then give over. But otherwise, he must think of her and her welfare only.

Yet he thought no good end would be served by seeing her again that evening, even if she were willing. She must be exhausted after the ordeal of the

funeral service, and would doubtless rest, or, more likely, spend the evening in the company of Mark Stanhope. So, after an excellent dinner, he sat on the veranda of the Inn for a smoke, and went to his rooms early.

He was at "The Oriels" next morning before the time set for the inquest.

For the first time in his career, Fleming Stone felt uncomfortable about his work. He was there as a detective. Well, surely, it was a detective's primary business to examine the premises, to look over the dead man's property, especially his letters and papers, to quiz the servants, to interview the family, and to endeavor generally to find out things.

None of this did Stone do. He reasoned that most of these things would be brought out at the inquest, and, if not, could be attended to later. It was not like a case where investigation had to be made immediately.

He found himself being received by Lily Mersereau. After a few courteous inquiries about Irma, Stone drew Lily into conversation.

"What is the general feeling in the community?" he asked, casually. "Do they already condemn Mrs. Steele?"

"Some do," Lily answered, and the glint in her eyes showed her satisfaction at her own statement. "But, of course, we who are Mrs. Steele's real friends won't hear of such a thing."

"Of course not. Yet, after all, the truth must

come out. You knew Mr. Steele. What sort was he? Pleasant? Affable?"

"Oh, very," Lily glanced about to make sure no one heard her misrepresentation of Wyatt Steele. "Kindly and gentle-mannered, always."

"Whew—w ——!" came a suppressed whistle of amazement from behind the portières of an alcove.

Stone sprang to pull the curtain aside, and disclosed a footman, who was moving chairs about and otherwise preparing for the inquest.

"What do you mean?" asked Stone, repressing a smile at the man's bland, innocent face, and expressionless eyes.

"Mean, sir?"

"Yes, didn't you whistle or ——"

"Whistle, sir? I? No, sir."

"You heard him, Mrs. Mersereau?"

"I—no, I didn't. Were you whistling, Peter?"

"No, madam."

"Oh, all right," and Stone let his smile come now. "Don't whistle, Peter. It is said to indicate a want of thought."

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir."

But when Stone turned again to Lily, she excused herself, saying she must look after Mrs. Steele.

"And I'll look after you, my lady," Stone told himself.

He turned toward the great lounge, or living-room, where the inquest was to be held, and, seeing several people already there, he selected what

seemed to him the most advantageous seat, and awaited the proceedings.

Coroner Meade was brisk and energetic in his manner and promptly at the hour appointed he took up his task. He began by questioning Doctor Campbell.

This witness was in none too pleasant a temper, for he remembered that he had made a mistaken diagnosis, and though afterwards corrected, it was not at all a good thing for his reputation.

However, the physician gave a clear and straightforward statement of his being called to attend Mr. Steele, of the patient's improvement the next day and of his, Campbell's, absence from town, when Doctor Loring took his place. The improvement of the patient's condition continued most of the night, he said, but very early next morning, the acute symptoms recurred and the patient died in violent convulsions.

"All of which you two doctors diagnosed as yellow atrophy of the liver?"

"Yes," replied Campbell, with a slightly belligerent air. "Nor was that strange. Phosphorus-poisoning occurs so rarely as to be almost unknown, and the symptoms in the two maladies are identical. Neither Doctor Loring nor I had ever seen a case of phosphorus-poisoning, and we were ignorant of the subject. We frankly admit this, but I wish to add that no remedies or antidotes could have in any way helped the patient."

"Yes. We are not chiding you at all. But what caused you to discover it was other than atrophy of the liver?"

Doctor Campbell hesitated a moment, and then said, slowly, "When I returned home from the deathbed of Mr. Steele, I found a note on my desk. It was an anonymous communication and—but here it is."

He handed a paper to the coroner, who read aloud the message it contained.

"Beware how you sign a certificate for death from natural causes."

"You don't know who wrote this, or who left it on your desk?"

"I do not."

"Yet you heeded its message."

"Yes. I know, of course, the stigma attached to anonymous letters, but as it was a direct challenge, I felt I must look into the matter. I called in Doctor Loring, and together we concluded to ask Mr. Booth to help us find the writer of the letter."

"Why Mr. Booth?"

"Because he is an amateur detective, and we thought he could trace the note."

"And did he?"

"No. He advised us to turn the whole matter over to the police. We did so, and also, we decided upon an autopsy. This proved that the death of Mr. Steele was due to poisoning by phosphorus."

"Yes. Now tell us, Doctor, how could that poison have been administered?"

"It was necessarily introduced into the food or drink of the victim. It could have been in any one of three forms. A powder, a liquid, or bits cut from the ends of matches. It could have been given in a highball or a cup of coffee, or any highly seasoned food. There is a taste and an odor to the poison, but not a strong taste or odor. It is soluble in alcohol, and more so in oil. But there was no way of determining in what form or by what means it had been taken into the stomach of Mr. Steele."

Doctor Loring's testimony was practically a repetition of Campbell's and the coroner seemed quite content with the explanation and description of the method of death, and turned to the next witness.

This was Gregg, the valet.

He was a noncommittal, unsatisfactory person, who paused a long time before each answer, and then said nothing of any importance.

"Well," said Coroner Meade, at last, "then you know of no reason why Mr. Steele should have taken his own life?"

"Well—no, sir." Gregg was silent a moment, then went on. "You see, he—he wasn't that sort, sir."

"What sort?"

This snapped-out retort nearly floored the witness, but he picked up and went on. "The sort who would kill himself, sir."

"And how do you know that?"

"Well—well—you can't valet a man year in and year out for five years without getting to know something about him. And—there's some as would and—some as wouldn't—kill themselves, I mean. And Mr. Steele was one of them as wouldn't."

Gregg, exhausted by his burst of speed, wiped his face with a big silk handkerchief and gratefully accepted his dismissal.

Wicks came next, but his testimony was as barren of information as Gregg's had been. "A kind master," he described Wyatt Steele, "though a strict one. Do your work right," he informed them, "and you got no calling down. But scamp it, and the bawling out was somethin' fierce! But that's right, a gent pays to have his work done and he wants it done right. All us servants will say the same about Mr. Steele. A good master to a good servant."

"Not a bad encomium," declared Meade. "Well, Wicks, you weren't home the night of the supper party—Sunday night?"

"No, sir. There was a special picture at the Palace, and we was all let to go but Jenny. She stayed in."

So Wicks was excused and Jenny called.

She proved to be a tight-lipped, taciturn maiden, who declared she knew nothing, and whose manner declared she wouldn't tell it if she did. The coroner, coax as he would, could get no information from the girl, whereupon Fleming Stone made a mental note to interview her himself later on, with a view to obtaining the desired information.

"You served all the food and drink that was used at the supper?" asked the coroner.

"Oh, no, sir. I only put some things on the table and they helped themselves. It was an informal supper."

"Did any of the guests come out into the kitchen?"

"Oh, yes, just about all of them."

"And did they—ahem—seem to be mixing ——"

"Mixing anything with the food?" said Jenny, helpfully. "No, sir, not as I noticed."

"Did Mr. Steele have anything the others didn't have?"

"Not as I noticed," repeated Jenny.

The coroner gave her up as a bad job and called Netta.

She was as voluble as Jenny was short of speech, and, once started, was ready to tell all she knew, if not more.

"Yes, sir, I was out at the picture with the rest. Oh, my, but it was a grand picture! 'The Ten Commandments,' it was, and if you coulda seen Moses—oh, that Moses! I'll never forget him! About as grand as they come, he was!"

"Never mind the picture. You were with Mrs. Steele the night her husband was taken ill?"

"I'll say I was! She was that upset and all stericky and nervous."

"Tell the truth, Netta," said Irma, in a low, even voice.

"Yes, ma'am. Well, Mister, maybe she wasn't so orful ky-umpty-oodle that night, after all."

"I don't understand your language."

"Oh, you don't! Why, I just mean, flabbergasted, bothered, disturbed, upsetted—all those things."

"Then do I gather she was calm and collected?"

"Dunno what you gather—daisies, maybe. But Mrs. Steele is always calm and collected—they's her middle names."

"Don't talk so much. Tell me plainly, was she annoyed for any reason, that night?"

"If she was, she didn't tell me about it." Netta gave a broad wink at Irma, who couldn't keep back a smile at the comical grimace.

"Couldn't you judge for yourself?"

"If I judged for myself, I'd say—yes, I'd certainly say, she was mad at him."

"Do you know for what reason?"

"I only know what she babbled to him about. And that was that he gave somebody a doodad ——"

"A what?"

"A doodad. A thingummy, you know. A brickety-brack, a junket, a ——"

"That will do, you are talking rubbish."

"Maybe I am, but it's all true."

"I can explain that," said Irma, with great dignity. "We all had a merry laugh over a jingle recited by one of the party, about a man who gave a girl a Dodo. It was merely a nonsense verse, and

Netta, not understanding, thought it was what she calls a doodad. All who were present will vouch for this."

Many heads were nodded, and the coroner, fearing more foolishness, gave Netta leave to depart.

Chapter XI

*"The law is the true embodiment
Of everything that's excellent.
It has no kind of fault or flaw,
And I, my lords, embody the law."*

W. S. GILBERT.

CORONER MEADE had seen to it that all the guests who were at the Sunday night party should be at the inquest, and, having finished with the servants, he turned his attention to these people. He didn't hope to get much real information from them, for he knew those who were friends of Irma's would be chary of their speech, and those who for any reason disliked her, would color their stories accordingly.

And so it proved.

Serena Tenney, who was called first, declared that the Steeles were a most happy couple and there was no friction or dissonance between them on that Sunday night or at any other time. She said that Wyatt Steele had been, on that occasion, a kindly and courteous host, and she positively denied that he had spoken sharply to his wife or that she had been annoyed at him.

Stone noted the looks on the faces of the others who had been supper guests, and concluded that Mrs. Tenney was taking a rose-colored view of the situation. Perhaps the coroner thought so, too, for

he said, reflectively, "Mrs. Steele pays you to champion her cause, I believe."

Serena turned white with suppressed wrath, but she preserved her calm poise and said, quietly, "I resent the expression you use. But I see you are ignorant of the customs of modern society. I am not championing causes for anyone, but I occasionally introduce my friends to my other friends. If they choose to show their gratitude in a material way, that is nobody's business."

"And when Mrs. Steele came to Kavanagh, a stranger, you performed such an office for her?"

"I certainly did, and very gladly. She has proved a welcome addition to our best circles."

Irma sat, with the ghost of a smile playing around her pale lips, as if she were amused by the conversation. It seemed a bit humorous to Stone, too. For, he thought, Mrs. Steele could give cards and spades to any other woman present. But, he reflected, if she was under a cloud of any sort, she needed a friend at court, who could prevent unnecessary questions or comments.

It did seem, Stone began to realize, as if everything were going against Irma Steele, which made him more than ever determined to get at the real truth of her tragic story. He sized up Serena Tenney as a good friend and a firm ally, but he felt sure she was actuated by mercenary motives, even though her friendship was also enlisted. The other two women, who were next interviewed, he distrusted greatly. These were Lily Mersereau and Rita Delano.

The former, smooth-tongued and suave-mannered, also declared that she had seen nothing at the supper party to make her think there was any ill-feeling between the Steeles. She knew Mr. Steele only slightly, but he had seemed to her a pleasant, good-tempered gentleman.

"You are now Mrs. Steele's companion?"

"Yes, and social secretary. I came at the request of Mrs. Tenney, who spoke in Mrs. Steele's name."

"When did you take this position?"

"The day Mr. Steele died. Mrs. Steele needed some one to assist her at once."

"Can you throw any light, of any sort whatever, on the reasons for the murder of Mr. Steele?"

"Why, no!" exclaimed Lily, startled. "How could I?"

"You might have seen or heard something since you have been a member of the household that would be indicative. Is there any man in whom Mrs. Steele takes an especial interest?"

Lily gasped. She didn't know coroners talked like this. But Meade had his own ways of finding out things and one was to fire unexpected questions at unsuspecting witnesses in the hope of surprising the truth from them.

"Why, I don't know, I'm sure," his witness replied. "The morning I arrived, she hid Mark Stanhope behind a curtain ——"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Mark, involuntarily. "What utter bosh!"

Irma said no word, but her expression of scorn and disdain made Lily squirm.

"Well," she defended herself, "I heard some one behind the curtain, and as I went upstairs, I heard Mark Stanhope's voice."

"This is correct, Mrs. Steele?" asked Meade of Irma.

"Correct that Mr. Stanhope was in the alcove, but not that he was in any sense hidden or hiding there. Mrs. Mersereau knows me but slightly, or she would know that I do not condescend to petty deceit."

"You can tell nothing more, Mrs. Mersereau, that might tend to throw any light on the tragedy?"

"Certainly not, as my statements are not accepted."

"Do you know of the mysterious music Mrs. Steele hears at night?"

"I know she says she hears it."

"You don't believe her story?"

"Not believing in the supernatural, I can't."

"But may there not be some rational and material explanation?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I know nothing about it."

"You are excused, Mrs. Mersereau. Mrs. Delano next."

Rita came forward, her air that of one who submits under duress.

"You were at the supper party, madam?"

"You know I was."

"And you helped to prepare the food for the occasion?"

"I made an omelet."

"Now answer this carefully. You mixed the ingredients for the dish. Can you be sure that nobody added anything to your concoction, either powder or liquid, when you weren't noticing?"

"Of course I can be sure of that. I made the omelet all myself. I cooked it in a chafing dish, and no one else touched it until it was served. If Wyatt Steele was poisoned at that supper party, it wasn't by means of my omelet."

"Who made the salad? I am told that phosphorus is easily soluble in oil."

"Mrs. Mersereau made the salad. But ——"

"But nobody interfered with my work, either," interrupted Lily, her face flushed with anger.

"And yet," Meade went on, calmly, "Mr. Steele was poisoned by phosphorus at about the time the supper was being eaten. Now, the supposition must be that some one of those present willfully introduced the poison into some portion of food or drink that was given to Mr. Steele. I suppose, since the servants were out, the plates were passed from one to another by the guests?"

"Yes, they were," Rita Delano declared. "So we are all suspect, in that sense. Any one of us could have doctored a plate of food and then passed it to anyone we wished to get rid of."

"Very well," the coroner said, blandly, "then

remains only to learn which of the party did a deed like that."

"Who had a motive?" asked Rita, seeming interested.

"I will ask the questions, if you please. That is not the province of a witness."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I only wanted to hurry things along."

Rita's smile was provocative, her red lips curved prettily, and her dark eyes flashed and then half closed, as if she possessed secret knowledge.

But Serena, who knew her pretty well, felt sure she knew really nothing of any moment about the affair, or she would have told it. More likely she was trying to attract notice by a pretense of knowledge.

"Do you know anything about the supernatural music?" pursued the coroner, who loved a sudden change of subject.

"I only know that I believe in the supernatural. If Mrs. Steele says she hears unearthly music, she does hear it. It is not given to everyone to understand these things, but psychic souls can do so."

Meade dropped this subject like the proverbial hot potato. He disliked all references to the supernatural except by people who didn't believe in such things.

"What do you know of Mrs. Steele's life before she came here?" he inquired next.

"Nothing at all," declared Rita. "But I know, because she herself told me, that her first husband said he would haunt her if she married again after

his death. That is what the weird music is—the haunting of Carlos—of Mr. Darcy.”

“Did you know Mr. Darcy?”

“Mercy, no. I never knew Mrs. Darcy until I came here to live. That was last Fall. I mean I came here in October. I didn’t meet Mrs. Darcy, as she was then, until some time in November. But we became friendly at once.”

A few further questions brought no definite information, and Meade sighed as he looked at his long list of still unheard witnesses.

The only other woman guest of the supper party was Patricia Raymond. She had been eagerly awaiting her turn, hoping that she could in some way aid Irma’s cause. Colvin Kane watched her anxiously, afraid that her zeal might outrun the bounds of discretion, for Pat was a babbler, and often spoke twice before she thought once.

Meade seemed to sense this, and he said, pleasantly enough, “Be careful, won’t you, Miss Raymond, to say only what you know and not what you may have heard others say.”

“Sure. I’ll remember. Fire away.”

“Then, did you see or hear anything at the supper party that would lead you to suspect anyone here present of any sort of participation in the crime that resulted in the death of Mr. Steele?”

“Well, no.” Pat wrinkled her pretty brows in a desperate effort to be correct in her answers. “No, I didn’t see anything or hear anything.”

She nodded her head then, as if in approval of her

own discretion. Her bronze curls, peeping from her little green felt hat, bobbed on her cheeks, and her eyes looked straight at the coroner, as if expecting a more leading question.

It came.

"Did you, then, notice in any way, anything that seemed to you indicative of animosity toward Mr. Steele, on the part of anyone?"

"You do use awfully long words, but I get your meaning. Well, to tell the truth, lots of us felt a little riled up at Mr. Steele that night."

"I don't mean a 'little riled up.' That would not lead to murder by poison. Unless you know of some deeper enmity than your words imply, you need not answer me."

"Oho, so you just want the low-down! Well, then, no, sir; I don't know of anyone mad enough at him to want him dead!"

Patricia looked disappointed. The wind had been taken out of her sails. Stone concluded she really knew nothing after all, but had hoped to make a small sensation with some petty gossip.

"And who are included in the 'lots' you mention as having grievances?"

Pat perked up a little.

"Well, myself for one. Mr. Steele treated me as a kid, and I want to be looked upon as grown up."

"I'm afraid, Miss Raymond, you are too childish for further witnessing, if that is your idea of important evidence."

Patricia flounced, and with difficulty restrained

herself from making a face at the coroner. But so annoyed was she at his slighting her importance that she lost her temper, flung discretion to the winds and burst out with:

"Well, Irma *did* say if he gave a present to another woman, she'd put poison in his food!"

A silence fell on the whole room.

"Is that a true statement, Miss Raymond?" asked the coroner, gravely.

"True that she said it, certainly. We all heard her. But, of course, she didn't mean it. It was a joke."

"A grim subject for a joke."

Patricia had caught the expression on Colvin Kane's face, and also the awful look that Mark Stanhope gave her.

Too, she noted how Irma paled, and even shivered at her words, and the young witness began to feel very uncomfortable. So much so, that she began to cry, and Coroner Meade dismissed her as incompetent to testify clearly. He would get the truth of that speech of Irma's from some one else.

Partly because she didn't dare resume her seat beside the enraged Kane, and partly because of a kindly glance from Irma's inscrutable eyes, Pat went over and slipped into a narrow space between Irma and Lily Mersereau.

Lily glanced coldly at the girl, but Irma put an arm around her, and held her hand in a forgiving pressure.

"I will ask you, Mrs. Steele," said Meade, after

a moment's thought, "if you made the remark just attributed to you."

Irma smiled, a sad little smile.

"Not exactly," she replied. "We had just heard a silly nonsense verse about a young man who gave a Dodo to a lady, and his fiancée was annoyed at it. I said, jestingly, it was a crime deserving of murder, and if my husband did such a thing, he might expect to have his food poisoned. But it was all the merest foolery."

Meade looked thoughtful. He didn't say "Many a true word spoken in jest," but he was obviously thinking so.

"Mr. Wilcox," he said, suddenly.

The lawyer took the witness stand. Like all the others, he seemed an unwilling witness, and evinced a strong dislike for the task before him.

"You were the legal counsel for the late Wyatt Steele?"

"Yes, in the few circumstances where he required a lawyer other than himself."

"I understand. It would not be for advice, but for legal business. You drew up his will?"

"I did."

"What, in a general way, are the terms of that document?"

"One-third of his estate to his wife, one-third to Austin Fenn, and one-third to Mr. John Black, a cousin of the testator."

"That is all?"

"There are some minor bequests to be attended to before the division in thirds is made."

"Was there any clause or stipulation regarding the means or manner of Mr. Steele's death?"

Irma's hands gripped themselves together. Her heart seemed to stop beating. Patricia's story was bad enough, but that could be discounted as the babble of an irresponsible child, but this impending revelation was a mortal blow.

Wilcox hesitated. Much as he hated to answer this question, it had to be done. He had evidence—dreadful, damning evidence—but he was in no way justified in withholding it. In fact, to withhold it would make him liable to criminal indictment.

He wondered how Meade had heard of this. Surely he must have known something, or he wouldn't have put the question. In a way, Wilcox was relieved, for he had been thinking he ought to tell of the note that was with the will, yet he had dreaded to bring forward a bit of evidence so fraught with fearful consequences.

"Yes," he said, at last, speaking slowly and in low tones. "Yes, there was a note inclosed in the envelope that contained my client's will. This note was not to be opened until after Mr. Steele's death."

"And the purport of that note?"

For answer, William Wilcox handed a folded paper to Coroner Meade.

After reading it, Meade said, "This seems to be a serious accusation. But we must not attach too much importance to it. It is well-known that Wyatt Steele

was of an impulsive nature, prone to sudden anger, even rage. It may be he wrote this note under a misapprehension which, induced by jealousy, clouded his better judgment."

Only Irma and Mark Stanhope understood him, and realized his kindness and foresight in thus preparing his jury for the coming revelation.

"I will read it," he went on, "but it must be considered in the light of other evidence and accepted testimony."

He read the terrible aspersion on two of the people present:

"Should I die in circumstances that seem in the slightest degree suspicious, the matter must be investigated. Question my wife, especially as to the history of her past life. She is in love with Mark Stanhope and he with her. One or other of them may do me in. I shall put this note with my will, and, if necessary, my executor must take up the matter. If my death is attributed to natural causes, destroy this and forget it."

A hush fell on the assembly.

Fleming Stone, shocked at this awful disclosure, studied the faces of Irma Steele and Mark Stanhope. From neither did he glean the slightest information.

Irma preserved her usual calm, and her gaze did not waver as she looked steadily at the coroner. Stanhope, equally calm, surveyed the jury, as if speculating what effect this new development would have on them.

The audience became restless. Heads turned as they stared at one another, and while some of Irma's friends gave her confident smiles, others avoided meeting her eyes. But whatever she felt, she showed only a quiet indifference to them all and seemed to be awaiting the further action of the coroner.

"You will take the stand, please, Mrs. Steele," was what she finally heard.

Rising, Irma took the chair indicated, and Meade began.

"Did you know your husband had written this note and left it with his will?"

By her momentary hesitation, Irma registered a bad impression to begin with. Then, deciding to tell the whole truth she said, "I didn't know of it until after Mr. Steele's death, when I found among his papers a copy of that same note."

"What did you do with the copy you found?"

"I burned it," she declared, with rather a haughty glance at him.

"Burned it! Why?"

"Because the note directed that if death occurred from natural causes the message was to be destroyed. And, at that time, the doctors had declared that death came from a recognized disease, so I deemed the note of no importance."

"And later, when you learned that the cause of death was not disease?"

"Then, I knew from the note there was a copy

inclosed with the will, and it would be attended to by Mr. Wilcox."

"How did you know there were two copies of that note?"

"Because," Irma looked at him with the utmost frankness, "the note I found was a carbon copy, so I assumed an original. Moreover, Mr. Steele was a methodical man, and if he left word that a note was inclosed with his will, that note would be found in his will."

"Will you state," Meade spoke gently, "your interpretation of this somewhat peculiar note?"

"Interpretation?"

"Yes. Your notion of why it was written."

"Oh! Well, I think it was written in a moment of sudden intense anger caused by unfounded jealousy. Mr. Steele was of an exceedingly jealous disposition, and when this feeling was aroused, he often stormed and raged without any real reason for his anger."

"You mean he exaggerated causes for resenting the attentions to you of other men?"

"I mean just that. At times he would not care who showed me attention or to what degree, and then again, he would go nearly insane with fury over some slight courtesy offered me. He was really not responsible when these fits of temper overtook him, and I am sure it was such an occasion when he wrote that note. For he had no reason to accuse Mr. Stanhope of ill-will toward him any more than any other man who visited at the house."

"And the reference to the death of your first husband?"

"That you doubtless understand already. My first husband, Mr. Darcy, died in similar circumstances to those of Mr. Steele's death. The doctors diagnosed Mr. Darcy's illness as yellow atrophy of the liver, and afterward concluded it was a case of phosphorus-poisoning."

"And in neither instance did you know who was responsible for such poisoning?"

"As God is my witness, I did not."

The deep solemnity of Irma's voice gave added weight to this statement, and Fleming Stone, listening intently for meaning rather than for words, believed she spoke the truth.

But if so, he thought, we are sure up against it!

"You imply then, that in the two cases some one, other than yourself, administered poison, secretly and with homicidal intent?"

"I must think that, unless it was an accident. I did not do it. If it was done, knowingly, it was by some other hand than mine."

"Do you know of anyone, sufficiently an enemy of either of the two men, to have wanted to bring about his death?"

"I cannot answer that question definitely. I know that Mr. Darcy had enemies. His family were displeased with him for marrying me, and he also had political and business enemies. The details of these things I do not know. In Mr. Steele's case, I know of no one who would desire his death. A high-

tempered man, he often made enemies in the sense of ill-feeling or petty quarrels. But I can think of no one who was seriously his enemy, to the point of killing him."

"Yet you assume some one did do so."

"I must assume that, or how did it occur? It is not a likely accident, and nothing can induce me to believe that Wyatt Steele committed suicide. What, then, is left, but murder by some one whose motives I know nothing about?"

Irma, with no indication of embarrassment or fear, was talking to the coroner as one might to a friend.

The jurymen listened in a sort of daze. Everything pointed to this woman's guilt, yet she was carrying things with a high hand.

What must they do about it?

Chapter XII

*"And the culminating pleasure
That we treasure beyond measure,
Is the gratifying feeling that our duty has been done."*
W. S. GILBERT.

BUT if the gentlemen of the jury were perturbed and harassed by these revelations, their state of mind was calm and serene compared to that of Fleming Stone.

That astute detective had suddenly and positively reached the conclusion that Irma Steele was innocent—that some one, some diabolically clever enemy, was bringing about her downfall by swift, sure and steady strokes.

It must be some one now in Kavanagh, or nearby, and also the same person or persons must have brought about the death of her first husband in Algeciras. For, Stone reasoned, the two deaths were, beyond all question, the work of the same hand.

Yet he balked a little at this conclusion, for, granting a clever murderer of Darcy, another, wanting to kill Steel, could have used the same method, hoping thereby definitely to incriminate Irma. An intricate moil—but Stone had accepted the fact that this was an intricate case, and was not to be solved quickly or soon.

He had scrutinized the attitudes of the witnesses, as well as listening to their words, and he had

reached a few conclusions. But the trend of the inquest frightened him. The net around Irma Steele was tightening so rapidly, so inexorably, that he feared an immediate and adverse verdict.

He braced himself for conflict. Once convinced of her innocence, he would move heaven and earth to prove it. But, so far, the odds were overwhelmingly against him. Never mind; he had fought against odds before. He would do it again.

Coroner Meade was a methodical sort. He had his list of witnesses, and they must be called in turn. Austin Fenn came next, and Austin Fenn was summoned.

He moved nonchalantly toward the witness chair, his distinguished air calling forth admiring glances from the audience.

After a few preliminary questions, Meade said, "You are a beneficiary under Mr. Steele's will, I believe."

There was no response of any kind, and the coroner repeated his own words.

Still no sound from the witness, and Meade spoke sharply, "Be kind enough to answer."

"Answer what?"

"My question."

"You asked me no question. You made a statement."

As this was true, a ripple of amusement went through the assembly, and the coroner was visibly embarrassed.

"Don't quibble," he said, petulantly. "Are you, then, a beneficiary?"

"I am told that I am."

"Why did Mr. Steele leave you so large a portion of his wealth?"

Fenn's handsome eyebrows went up and his fine face expressed surprise at this crude speech, but he only said, indifferently, "I haven't a notion. I dare-say, it was done on a sudden impulse, which he probably regretted afterward, but failed to correct."

"Why do you think that? Were not you two close friends?"

"Oh, yes, but I'm close friends with dozens of men who wouldn't leave me any such legacy."

Stone felt he could neglect this witness's information. For if Fenn knew anything, Meade wouldn't get it out of him. And if he knew nothing, nothing could be learned from him.

So Fleming Stone went back to his occupation of studying the faces of those who most interested him, and he found his eyes lingering on the lovely, sad countenance of the chief figure of all.

Irma sat like a marble statue. She never moved so much as a finger, and her expression, though sad, was not dejected nor despairing. She would die game, he concluded, and then shuddered at the inadvertent way he had phrased it to himself.

He must save her, somehow. He was more and more sure, every moment, of her complete innocence, and, therefore, he must find the guilty man.

Could it be Austin Fenn?

There was no strong reason to think so, yet he was a beneficiary, he had a clever way of parrying questions, and, as Stone studied him, he came to the conclusion that Fenn's quick wits could be used for sharp practices as well as more honest ones.

He hadn't much money, that was an open secret. He was at the supper party and he would have no difficulty in obtaining phosphorus.

Moreover, Stone remembered, he had been unwilling to take on Irma's legal business. This was strange, unless he had a secret reason.

Stone listened more intently to the conversation.

"Do you know of anyone," Meade was saying, "who hated Wyatt Steele enough to murder him?"

"Oh, yes. I hated him enough for that, myself, but I didn't kill him."

"Why did you hate him?"

"Well, you see, he was an eminently hatable man. He had just about all the unpleasant traits human nature can possess. He was mean, small, ill-natured, jealous, vindictive, and he bickered with his wife before folks. That is unpardonable."

"But hardly a cause for murder."

"No, except to the lady herself, and, of course, she didn't do it."

"Who, in your opinion, did?"

"Must have been some one at that supper."

Fenn looked at the coroner, as if with fresh interest, and went on:

"Nobody suspects the servants, nobody thinks it was suicide. So it had to be one of our crowd. As I

am not the criminal, I can view without prejudice all the others and make up my mind on the merits of the case."

"And have you made up your mind?"

"Not yet, but I haven't heard all the merits of the case. Why don't you get along with the inquiries? You can't get anything out of me."

Meade seemed to agree to this, and dismissed Fenn at once.

Fleming Stone nodded sagaciously.

"Pseudo-clever," he told himself. "Didn't take much of a rise out of the coroner, but got off unnoticed himself. I think he knows a bit."

Ray Booth came next. He seemed eager to talk, and said, almost at once, "Fenn is right. The murderer was one of those present at the supper. I am rather a detective myself, and I hope to find out the criminal's identity. You see ——"

"That will do, Mr. Booth," Meade interrupted. "Confine yourself to answering questions, please. Have you any definite reason for suspecting any of the supper guests?"

"Only common sense. That's really all a detective needs. Psychoanalysis and all that foolishness are just so much poppycock."

"Never mind your detective work. Do you know of anyone who had a grievance against Mr. Steele?"

"I don't know anyone who didn't."

"He seems to have had few friends."

"You're right, he had few friends. Even his wife was fed up with his tantrums."

"You know that to be a fact?"

"How could it be otherwise? She'd stood all a mortal woman ought to stand, and more, too—much more. He ballyragged her continually. If she had a hand in this thing, she did a service to the world at large."

"Don't surmise. State only facts."

"But I don't know any facts. I'm going to dig some up, but a detective can't perform miracles."

Stone smiled at this talk. He had heard amateur detectives brag before, and his one hope now was that he need not encounter Ray Booth in the course of his own investigations. This chap, he concluded, meant nothing to him, and he waited for the next witness, who was Colvin Kane.

Kane was only twenty-four, a nice, curly-headed boy, who seemed intent on behaving just as a witness should. He told a careful story of the supper party, which gave no new information of any sort. He, like Booth, expressed a bent for detective work, but Meade was accustomed to this sort of thing, since the vogue of detective stories had set in.

He asked Kane regarding the attitudes of the guests that night toward Steele, hoping to glean from this youngster some hint that an older person might suppress, but Colly said he noticed nothing beyond the usual chaffing repartee.

"You heard nothing of the mysterious music?"

"'The Whoosh'? No, indeed—wish I had."

"What do you mean by 'The Whoosh'?"

"Oh, that's what we call it—the thing that makes

the music, you know. It isn't human, and it can't be a real angel, so we call it a 'Whoosh,' and let it go at that."

"What do you know about it?"

"Only what Mrs. Steele has told me. But, somehow, I can't help feeling that there may be a rational—a material—explanation, and I'm going to find out."

"Let me know when you do," Meade said, and dismissed Colly with scant ceremony.

Mark Stanhope was called, and he came striding forward, with a grim-set face that told its own story.

"You are a friend of Mrs. Steele's?" Meade said, interrogatively.

"Assuredly," returned Mark. "Everybody in Kavanagh would say 'yes' to that question."

"And you were a friend of Mr. Steele's?"

"I was as friendly with him as he allowed me to be. He resented the presence of any man who felt respectful admiration for Mrs. Steele, and as any man who met her must have felt that, Wyatt Steele made life unpleasant for many of us."

"He had a quick temper?"

"Quick is too mild a word. He had a diabolical temper and it could be roused in an instant over the most trifling causes. As a rule, he vented it upon his wife, even though she had not been the one to stir him up."

"And this explains her declaration that she would poison his food?"

Mark looked up quickly, then spoke carefully.

"I can't think you are intentionally distorting the speech another witness has reported, so I will remind you that the remark about poisoning food was in reference to a humorous verse which had just been recited by one of the guests."

"But it goes to prove, Mr. Stanhope, that there must have been in Mrs. Steele's mind a subconscious idea of poison as a means of murder."

Mark refrained from looking at the coroner, lest that worthy read an impulse to murder in his own brown eyes. Forcing his voice to remain steady, he said, with easy nonchalance, "That is not strange, when one remembers that Mrs. Steele's first husband died as a result of poison."

"A strange coincidence, that her second husband should meet a similar death!"

"Yes," agreed Mark, "unless the same villainous hand brought about the two deaths."

"You imply that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Steele could have had a common enemy?"

"Why not?"

"They were not acquainted with one another."

"You don't know that to be a fact."

"At any rate, none of the guests at the Sunday night supper party knew the first husband of Mrs. Steele."

"You don't know that to be a fact, either."

Stone silently approved of Mark's tactics. He was scoring no definite points, but he was discrediting Meade's statements in a courteous, business-like

way, which might or might not carry some weight with the jury.

"I have no wish to assume facts that I cannot substantiate, Mr. Stanhope," said Meade, who evidently felt great respect for this witness.

"Then don't do it," said Mark, quietly.

"You, I assume, think Mrs. Steele innocent of all knowledge as to the death of her husband."

"I do think so, because I know the lady. A fine, high-principled character, incapable of crime of any sort."

"You speak from a personal feeling?"

"I do, but all of her friends, all of her acquaintances would testify to the beauty and worth of Mrs. Steele's life and character."

If Mark had smiled, or had looked fatuous or sentimental, there might have been raised eyebrows at his speech, but he was so calmly judicial, so candidly direct, that his very sincerity came home to them all.

"She has a staunch champion in you," said Meade, courteously. "But I regret to say there are circumstances and bits of evidence which cannot be ignored however high the lady's qualities may rate. You are excused, Mr. Stanhope. Mrs. Steele, will you come forward?"

Irma, deeply moved by Mark's quiet tribute, came slowly, but with dignity, and took the witness chair.

Stone, after one glance at Meade's set face, knew that the real ordeal was about to begin.

And it did.

By steady steps, Meade brought out the life history of Irma Gale, as her name was then, and caused her to tell, herself, of her girlhood in her Kansas home, her desire to see the world, her school-teaching days and her savings, to be used for a trip to Europe. He led her on to tell of this trip taken at last, about three years ago. He brought out her joy in the ocean voyage, her leaving the liner at Gibraltar, for a day's stay.

Dramatically, she told of her going over to Algeciras, of her meeting Carlos Dercia, of their mutual love at first sight, and of her remaining there, marrying Dercia and living there.

"I understand, Mrs. Steele, that in the family of your Spanish husband, there was a prejudice against marrying fair-haired women."

"That is true. There was also the tradition of a Curse on members of the house of Dercia who did this thing."

"You have fair hair ——"

"I have. Mr. Dercia and I decided to brave the Curse. He held it was merely a tradition and had no real meaning."

"Will you tell the exact threat it carried?"

"Certainly."

And the house sat, silent and thrilled as Irma recited in a low voice the old lines of the House of Dercia:

"Till ice shall flame and snow shall burn
No power the Dercia Curse may turn.

If that a Dercia ever dare
To wed a maid with ashen hair,
The Dercia Curse descends—descends ——
And the life of the youngest Dercia ends."

"Your daughter is the youngest Dercia, to-day?"

"So far as I know."

"And you braved this Curse ——"

"I didn't believe in it. I don't believe in it now. I have no fear for my daughter so far as that superstition is concerned."

"You have no superstitions, then?"

"I—no. None."

"Yet you hear supernatural music at night?"

"I imagine I do. Of course, it is only imagination."

"What is the music you think you hear?"

"Do you mean the instrument or the song?"

"Both."

"The instrument sounds like a lute or lyre. It is a fine, soft-sounding melody, but I can't say certainly on what it is played. The song—it is always the same—is one that Mr. Dercia—Mr. Darcy—and I heard often in Algeciras. The name of the song is 'Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo.' That means 'One Night During the Time of the Harvest.' The air is very beautiful and the story is of an unhappy love affair of a sad Spanish maiden. The refrain, a wailing strain, is the cry of her heart, echoed and re-echoed by the singing winds."

"And this song—you think you hear it in the silence of the night?"

"I know I hear it. And always at midnight—the ghosts' high noon."

"But you said it is imagination."

"It may be, but I hear it all the same."

Irma's smile was almost mystic, and the coroner felt a little afraid of her.

"Do you, Mrs. Steele, attribute this weird music to the promise of your husband to haunt you if you married another man?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

Her smile was dazzling now, and Meade concluded hurriedly to change the subject.

"How did you happen to marry Mr. Steele?"

And now the face of his witness changed utterly. The smile faded, the mysticism disappeared and Irma Steele was dignified and rather severe-looking.

"I suppose you want the truth."

"I certainly do."

"Then, I married him because he would not, otherwise, take care of my business affairs."

"And just what were those important business affairs? Money matters?"

"No; I had sufficient money, but I was bothered by anonymous letters threatening me."

"Blackmail?"

"Something of that sort. And Mr. Steele would take the matter in charge only on condition that I marry him."

"You didn't care for him, then?"

"I liked him; I knew him but slightly, and he seemed a fine man. I didn't love him as I had loved

Carlos Dercia, and I told him so, but he said that didn't matter—he wanted to marry me all the same. So we were married.”

“Why were you so anxious about these letters you received?”

“They threatened my child. I feared for her. I thought the Curse of the Dercias was a worthless tradition, but it might be used as a pretext to harm my baby. I would have married anybody to save her!”

It was quite evident to Fleming Stone that Irma's pathetic story was making an impression on the jury. The half-dozen men craned forward to look at her.

With no thought of posing for dramatic effect, Irma was simple of word and gesture. She told her story as she remembered it, with feeling, and the jury, to a man, believed her and were ready to exculpate her.

Mark Stanhope was jubilant, though he showed no hint of it in his face. He sat quietly, watching Irma, watching the coroner, watching the jurymen.

He had had misgivings, but he realized now that Irma's own personality, her charm and grace had made her story seem a real account of her life, a real human document filled with sadness and trouble through no fault of hers.

“Then,” Stone's leaping mind realized, “we must find the villain who brought it all about. It was doubtless the same person who killed the first husband, who did the blackmailing stunt, and who killed

the second husband. If this is so, if it is the one person we seek, he must be found."

"Mrs. Steele, have you no idea who could have been instrumental in the matter of poisoning Mr. Steele?"

"I can't help a feeling that it is—it must be the same one who poisoned my first husband. This may be illogical, it may be impossible, but it is my belief."

"But you knew both men. You knew they had no friends in common. They could have no enemies in common."

"But it might have been that the animosity, in both instances, was directed, not at them—but at me."

Meade looked at her.

"You mean," he said, slowly, "they strove, are striving, to injure you, by means of these two attacks on your two husbands?"

"Exactly. They failed, because of insufficient evidence——"

An interruption occurred then, as a messenger brought a note and a parcel to the coroner. It was from one of the police detectives, who had been detailed to search "The Oriels" thoroughly while the inquest was in progress.

This diligent worker sent the message:

"Found this hidden under a pile of linerree in Mrs. Steele's wardrobe."

Meade read the note, pocketed it, and opened the parcel slowly. As he unfolded the last of the

paper wrapping, he exposed to view a box of matches—phosphorus matches. Opening the box carefully, he learned that every match in it was headless.

Gravely, he turned to Irma, still sitting in the witness chair.

"These were found among your things, Mrs. Steele."

"They were placed there, then. I know nothing of them!" But her calm was broken at last. Her poise was gone, her mouth worked convulsively, and she gave a low moan as she hid her face in her hands.

Meade asked no more questions. With a few words of direction, he sent the jury out of the room.

The foreman of that jury was a just man and a hard man. He warned the others about being misled by a beautiful, wily and clever woman. He said other things, and after a short session, they filed back to the inquest room, with the verdict, "Murdered by his wife, Mrs. Irma Darcy Steele."

Chapter XIII

*"Though years their share of sorrow bring,
We know that far above
All other griefs are griefs that spring
From some misfortune happening
To those we really love."*

W. S. GILBERT.

FLEMING STONE sat in his pleasant sitting-room at the Inn. It was the evening of the day that had brought disaster and despair to Irma Steele.

Stone was not so much surprised as perplexed.

"It doesn't click," he told himself. "That woman is not guilty, but who is? It's dreadful to think of her shut up in jail, but it may be the means of arriving at the truth. Come in."

The last was in response to a tap at his sitting-room door.

Mark Stanhope appeared, looking, as might be expected, like a wreck of his usual alert self.

"Don't talk," he said to Stone, who was about to voice some word of cheer. "I can't bear it. Just listen, and I'll do the talking. Now, as you know, that infernal note of Steele's implicated me along with Irma. I'm ready—more than ready—anxious to take over the crime, to confess to the killing, but I want my story to sound plausible—to carry absolute conviction. That's why I'm here, for you to advise and help me. Tell me what to say. You must

see that if I merely go to the authorities and tell them that I poisoned Steele's food, they won't believe me. They'll know I'm just trying to free Irma. You do see that, don't you?"

"Of course," said Stone, quietly. "They would assuredly see through you."

"Then can't you devise some way that I can take over the crime and make them believe I'm guilty?"

"And have Mrs. Steele freed, and you jailed in her place?"

"Sure. Oh, Mr. Stone, do that for me, and I'll bless you forever! Can you?"

"I can't think of any way, for the moment. Perhaps I can cook up something. Are you sure you want to do this? It may mean the chair for you."

"What of that, if it frees her? Oh, I'm as fond of life as the next man! I've no desire to die, especially in the way you mention, but if it will save that woman's life, I string right along with Nathan Hale!"

Stone looked admiringly at the fine, frank young countenance and saw there unmistakable honesty and illimitable courage.

"But if she is guilty ——"

Stanhope's face changed. A look like a dagger of lightning flashed in his eyes, and he said, in a voice full of repressed fury, "No one else could say that to me, and get away with it! But I know you're true blue and you're saying it from a sense of duty."

"Exactly that, Stanhope. I'm glad you see it straight. Now, don't get angry, but how do you

know, except because of your affection for her, that Mrs. Steele is innocent? You know of the case of the other husband. You know that she cares for you—wants to marry you—therefore ——”

“Therefore, she killed Wyatt Steele in order to be free to become my wife! No, Mr. Stone, she did not. I am not blinded by my adoration of her. I realize fully the whole situation, and I know that that woman is the victim of a conspiracy which is neither small nor simple of plan. It is a deep-laid scheme and there are desperate villains at the head of it all. Now, you must track them down. That is your job. But, meantime, I want to take Irma's place in jail, and if the mystery is never solved, if an innocent person must die for Wyatt Steele's murder, then let it be myself and not that pure, sweet woman.”

“I understand, Stanhope, and I do you the justice of believing that you mean all this exactly as you have stated it. You are not making a grandstand play or sacrificing yourself like a martyr, but you are practical and honest in your motive. But I doubt if it can be done. You must see for yourself, that however the matter is put to them, as soon as the police realize that you are offering yourself as a substitute prisoner, they will know it is to save Mrs. Steele, and they will scoff at it. From time immemorial, the lover has striven to sacrifice himself for his lady, but, in this day and generation, he isn't allowed to do it.”

"I hoped you could dope out some way. Plant clues, you know, or fake evidence."

"And make myself an accessory?"

"Oh, I didn't think of that!"

"Well, think of it. Not only regarding myself, but you. If you fake evidence and so forth, you will not only get yourself in very deeply, but it will in no way help Mrs. Steele."

"Of course, I meant successful faking. Clues that must be accepted, evidence that must be believed."

"Only the truth can stand such tests. Now, look here, Stanhope, you can serve Mrs. Steele better in other ways. But first, you must accept the idea of her being in jail for a time. Hard as it is—and I daresay you won't believe this—it may make it easier for us to get her freed eventually, than if she were still in her own home."

"No, I see no reason why I should believe that."

"Then, here's the reason. If Mrs. Steele is innocent, there is a conspiracy against her. Or, at least, a clever criminal, himself guilty, is making her appear to be the murderer. Now, since she is arrested, and behind bars, this criminal is going to relax his energies, going to believe that he has accomplished his desired end, and merely await the final scene. This gives us time and scope to get in our work. Don't think I have been idle to-day. I have learned a great deal, and I believe—I have reason to believe—I can sooner or later discover the diabolically clever mind that is at the back of all these horrors."

"Then you think Irma is being framed?"

"Yes; I think so. But that doesn't prove it. Nor do I state it as a fact. More beautiful and more dignified women than she have turned out to be criminals. Sit still; you'll have to get used to hearing remarks like that, and you must learn not to see red when they are spoken. You're young, but let this grave situation make a man of you. Meet it bravely, and without sudden spasms of unbridled temper. Such lapses can do no good and may work irreparable harm."

Mark Stanhope looked at the older man very soberly.

"You are right," he said. "This predicament must find me ready to meet it. This trouble, I must take wisely, and I will do so, if you will help and advise me. I know I am talking like a priggish schoolboy, but I am so desperate."

"You're all right. There's nothing of the prig about you. Now, forget yourself, and put all your thoughts on the problem. I can't say forget Mrs. Steele, but remember that all the time you can take will be well-spent working on the case."

"Can I work? Can I help, really?"

"I should say so! I expect you to be my right-hand man. Give up your idea of confessing to the crime. It might be a hard matter to set right later."

"But, you see, Steele put in his note that I was to be suspected with her."

"Well, you weren't, and I can't spare you at present. Besides, Mrs. Steele hasn't confessed. She isn't convicted. She is in discomfort, yes. But if you

stand by, and help me, it will help her far more than having you in a cell."

Stanhope sighed. His mansion of sacrifice was falling about him, and he couldn't see any way to help Stone. Probably the detective was making up that about his being of use on the case.

Reading his thoughts, Stone said, "The work I give you to do may be distasteful. It is of the nature of spying on people. This is not a nice occupation for an honorable man, but one must fight fire with fire and I cannot go on with my investigations until I get what our crook friends call the 'low-down' on some Kavanagh citizens."

"Who?" asked Mark, eagerly. "I'll do whatever you say."

"Well, Fenn, and Mrs. Mersereau. Do you think they are loyal friends of Mrs. Steele's?"

"I never thought about Fenn, but I will admit I don't feel any too sure of Lily. Yet they can't be really implicated, can they?"

"That's what I want to know. Can you be adroit enough to talk to them about the affair, and get their views and opinions regarding the verdict of the jury, without their suspecting that you are quizzing them?"

"Oh, yes. I'm good at that sort of thing. I mean I can chatter along and draw them out, till I see just where they stand."

"That's the idea. Tackle Mrs. Tenney, also. And then there are those two youngsters—Kane and Miss Raymond. I don't know why, but they seem to

me to be a menace. Shut them up if you can—make them understand that they mustn't talk so much. They tell the truth, I suppose, but they exaggerate."

"I'll throw a scare into them. They're good enough kids, but a bit gay. What about Ray Booth?"

"He's by way of doing amateur detective work. I don't think he'll do any harm, whether he does any good or not. He seems zealous, if inexperienced as a sleuth. Mrs. Delano is an uncertain proposition. See what you can learn from her, but watch your step—she's a cute one. That, I think, does up the supper party. If one of those guests was guilty, we must find out which one. If some outsider did the trick, we'll have to start all over again. Of course, it could have been some business enemy of Steele's, or somebody from out of town, that we know nothing about."

"Maybe the cousin, the John Black, who inherited some money."

"I've been wondering about him. How can we get hold of him?"

"I daresay Wilcox knows where he is. I've heard he was a grim old curmudgeon. Do you need him?"

"Only to size him up as a possible suspect. You see, whatever's done I must do it. I mean, the police have laid off. They consider the incident closed. So, it's up to me to use every line of effort and omit no possibility."

Ray Booth was announced then, and Stone sent Mark away.

"What are we to do?" was Booth's opening remark after greetings had been exchanged.

"Work toward the truth," responded Stone, speaking seriously.

"Then you don't believe Mrs. Steele guilty?"

"Do you?"

"Why, no, I can't believe it. Yet, there is so much evidence ——"

"What is it?"

"Well, to start with, the two identical murders. Must they not be the work of the same person? And who could have a motive for killing both men, except the wife of both men?"

"That's logical enough. But the second murder could have been committed by some one who merely copied the first, of which he was not guilty."

"Yes—I suppose that could be."

"But you spoke of much evidence. Tell me of it, for I'm newly arrived here and I don't know all about the case."

"Oh, the note in Steele's will. The quarrel that night between husband and wife. And, finally, and most damning of all, the box of matches, with their phosphorus heads cut off."

"I didn't know one could buy phosphorus matches nowadays."

"They're not common, but they can be found. Or, maybe she brought them back from Algeciras with her. You know a similar box of headless matches was found in her room after that first murder."

"No, I didn't know that. A very careless sort, she must be."

"Oh, well, they always slip up somewhere. Now, I'm fed up with it all, Mr. Stone. I thought I'd like detective work, but I've had enough. How you stick it, I don't see. A lovely woman like that, put in a common jail, in a cell—oh, it's unthinkable! I believe I'll go off on a trip somewhere. This whole thing has played the devil with my nerves."

"Are you in love with Mrs. Steele?"

Booth looked at him.

"You've guessed it," he said, with a short laugh. "Yes, I confess I've fallen for her. But I didn't poison her husband. I'm glad he's dead, but I had no hand in it."

"Who do you think did?"

"Hard to say. Supposing it was one of the supper guests. Mrs. Mersereau is the only one I can think of in that light. And that's rather absurd on the face of it. If she killed him, she wouldn't be back there now, as companion, or whatever she calls herself."

"Then you lean toward the guilt of Mrs. Steele."

"Can't see any other explanation. And I can't stand that, so I'm going away. I'll get over it—my infatuation, I mean. She doesn't know it; she doesn't care for me at all. Hardly knows I exist. She's all for that Stanhope chap. Oh, well, it's all in the day's work."

"I thought you were interested in Mrs. Delano?"

"Rita? Oh, not particularly. We're good friends, that's all. I like the little Raymond flapper, but there

it is again. She's all wrapped up in Colly Kane. Every Jack has his Jill. So, Mr. Stone, I can't think you'll miss my assistance very much, but I'll withdraw the assurances of help that I gave you. I'm sure you'll understand."

"I do understand—that is, I see how you'd hate to do anything that might help to prove Mrs. Steele's guilt. But suppose you could do something to help establish her innocence? How about that?"

"Too doubtful. And I don't believe I've got the right complex for that sort of thing, anyway. No, I'm definitely out of it. I'm going off for a short trip, and I'll be back in time for the trial."

"Have you ever been to Algeciras?"

"Good Lord, no! I stopped at Gibraltar once, on a Mediterranean trip, but I didn't go over to Spain. Why?"

"I only wanted to get a line on the place. I suppose it's very beautiful—ilex and nightingales and all that."

"Oh, I suppose so. Pink and blue houses and bugin villæa and green hillsides."

"You're thinking of Italy. Algeciras is in Spain."

"Well, just on the edge, only a stone's throw from England, if it comes to that."

"England?"

"Gibraltar—that's England. All those Mediterranean ports look alike. Algeciras has a charming inn—so I've been told."

"Who told you?"

"I—I don't remember. Why? Is it important?"

"Oh, no. But I've heard it was a rotten old place. I've never been there, either."

"Algeciras is one of the loveliest spots on earth—I've been told repeatedly by people who have been there often. In fact, Mrs. Steele told me so."

"Oh, well, she spent her honeymoon there. I suppose she loved that first husband of hers."

"Yes, I've heard so. Well, she never loved Wy Steele."

"What induced her to marry him?"

"Don't you know?"

"Not for certain."

"Well, to put it plainly, she married him because he wouldn't keep her secret unless she did."

"What secret?"

"The secret that she poisoned her first husband."

"You mean that she was accused of poisoning him."

"Word it as you choose. She was accused, tried, and would have been convicted if there had been an English-speaking member of the jury. But they were all Spanish, and she couldn't talk to them nor they to her. There was an interpreter, of course, but Mrs. Steele so bamboozled him that—well, she got off—that was all that was necessary."

"You know a lot about it."

"Yes, it was all in the papers, and it interested me as a case. It seemed so romantic."

Booth went off into a brown study, or seemed lost in memories, whistling softly as he ruminated.

"Well," he smiled, as he sat up straight, "I've

been thinking over that other trial. And it is astonishing how alike the two cases are. But there was no supper party at the first one—nobody to suspect but the wife herself.”

“Nor are the members of the supper party really suspected in this second instance,” Stone told him. “Very little attention was paid to their testimony.”

“Oh, the coroner wasn’t asleep. If he’d noticed anything suspicious in the yarns the guests told, he’d have pounced on it.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Well, Mr. Booth, if you’ve really withdrawn your offers of help, I mustn’t let you waste your time on me.”

“A courteous dismissal,” and Booth smiled in his good-natured way.

“I mean it to be courteous, yes,” and Stone smiled in return.

His guest departed, Stone returned to his easy chair, lighted a cigar and began to think things out.

A tall but slender man, he gave no evidence of unusual physical strength or prowess, but he was really a mass of energy. His will-power was enormous and his endurance practically limitless. His pertinacity had sometimes been described as that of a puppy at a root. And he had been known to say that a puppy at a root had his work cut out for him.

He felt that way just now, and he decided that his present root was an unusually large and tough one. But, as a puppy, he must be at it, so he arranged his thoughts in order and took them up methodically.

First, he decided to work on the conviction that Irma Steele was innocent of both crimes of which she had been accused. This predicated a villain of exceedingly clever mind and black and ruthless heart. Further, he assumed the same villain in each case. He admitted to himself that he was assuming without actual proof, but he felt he could get nowhere without these assumptions, so he conceded them as facts, until disproved.

Now, this villain, granting that it was the same person both times, must have been in Algeciras at the time of the first murder, and in Kavanagh at the time of the second one. This would cut down the list of suspects considerably, that is, taking the Sunday supper party as the list of suspects.

It was annoying to be obliged to remember that the villain might not have been at the supper party at all. But for the preliminary considerations, Stone was assuming that the murderer was there and achieved his fell design by means of placing phosphorus in some form in the food or drink that was partaken of only by Wyatt Steele.

The detective was not unduly impressed with the box of headless matches that had been the decisive point, or so he had been told, in the jury's verdict that day. He knew that the matches could have been smuggled into their hiding-place after the crime had been committed. And he gave the villain, whoever it might be, more credit than to think he or she would deliberately leave such an obvious clue, except with the intention of having it found.

To his way of thinking it was a point in Irma Steele's favor, rather than against her. For had she poisoned her husband, the first thing she would do would be to destroy those headless matches. She had had ample time to do so.

This, with other points, made his faith in her innocence stronger than ever, and he went on to the others.

The two youngsters and Serena Tenney he cut out at once. Stanhope, of course, he exonerated. This left, therefore, Austin Fenn and Ray Booth; also, Lily Mersereau and Rita Delano.

He had no clue pointing to any of these, and he began to cast about for an outsider. These people must be checked up on, of course, but he could see no motive for any of them.

To be sure, Booth had admitted his admiration for Mrs. Steele, but it seemed a lukewarm passion after all, and Ray didn't seem the sort that would do murder to get a chance at the lady.

There was that half-wit, but Stone couldn't imagine that gentle-mannered, lackadaisical youth staging a poisoning scene.

There were probably others—business enemies, maybe. Wilcox, the lawyer, could tell him about these.

Then, there was one name that had stuck in Stone's mind from the beginning. That was Mr. John Black. Grim and blunt he was said to be. What price Black for a suspect? Why couldn't he come,

like a thief in the night, poison his cousin Wyatt, and go away again?

He had motive enough, if he wanted money. He had opportunity, if he had brains enough to come and go secretly. He could call on his cousin openly, or visit his bedroom stealthily, and introduce the phosphorus in his highball or glass of water on his bedside table.

Stone was imagining now, but, so far as he could learn, nobody had checked up on glasses or plates. Nobody knew whether or not food or drink had been poisoned. Nor could such investigations have been expected, for, until the man was dead, no thought of foul play had entered anyone's mind.

Stone inclined to the idea of John Black's entrance by means of a bedroom window. The slope of the hillside, on which the house stood, made the windows of Steele's room fairly easy of access. An agile man could have clambered up to the ornate base of the oriel, and stepped over the sill with little trouble.

Then, supposing money to be his object, he could ask Steele for it, and, if an indignant refusal ensued, the intruder could secretly slip his preparation of phosphorus in carafe or water tumbler, and depart, knowing that the dose would in all probability be swallowed.

Pure theory, yes, but logical and plausible.

Anyway, he would like to see Mr. John Black. He concluded to bring about such a meeting, and then, having reached the end of his preliminary

cogitations, the celebrated detective sought his dreamless couch.

But before he fell asleep, he had included one more in his list of suspects. And that was Wilcox, the lawyer.

"Not that I think he's guilty," Stone told himself, sleepily, "but it will be fun to cross him off."

Chapter XIV

*"A hapless woman lay
Within that prison grim—
The fact, I've heard him say,
Was quite enough for him."*

W. S. GILBERT.

STONE arose next morning in the state of mind which is called, poetically, "eager for the fray." Not that he looked for a fray, but he was eager to do his part toward bringing one about, if necessary.

He felt an urge to talk to the servants at "The Oriels," well knowing the possibilities of such interviews. But the principals were so unwilling to talk, and so palpably ignorant of any real points of interest, that he turned his attention to the lesser lights of the staff.

Jenny he insisted on seeing, having noticed her at the inquest. He took her to the small alcove room, so useful for private interviews, and shut the door behind them.

Lily Mersereau had been in the living-room as they passed through it, but Stone merely gave her a word of greeting and went on. He was in no mood to be interrupted or interfered with.

"Now, Jenny," he began, "you are to tell me what it was that you saw at the supper party that may shed some light on this poisoning business."

"Me? I saw nothing, sir."

"Very well. I suppose you know that if you tell lies about this, and keep back the knowledge you have, it may land you in jail as an accessory after the fact. Do you know what that means?"

"I don't know what accessory means, sir."

But the girl had gone a chalky white, and Stone felt that she had at least a glimmering of the purport of his speech.

"Then I'll tell you. It means one who has first-hand knowledge regarding a crime, and neglects or refuses to impart that knowledge when questioned. That makes such a person liable to arrest and punishment."

"But—but, I don't know anything ——"

"Oh, yes, you do. You told the coroner, without being asked, that you didn't see anybody mixing anything with the food that might prove harmful to the one who ate it. That was not entirely true."

"How do you know?" The girl was panicky now. Her fingers were tightly interlaced, and her thin lips pressed tightly together, as if to restrain any possible speech.

"I know, because you gave away your thoughts in your face. You can't fool me, Jenny. You are not clever enough. Now, it will be far better for you to confide in me. I am not unfriendly—I don't want to cause you trouble. But I must and will have the truth. Are you shielding Mrs. Steele?"

"Oh, no! Oh, my, no! She had nothing to do with it."

"No? Who did, then? Come, now, out with it!"

Jenny's attitude changed suddenly. Deciding to tell what she knew, she told it frankly.

"I don't know who did it, Mr. Stone, sir. I don't know as it was poison ——"

"As what was poison?"

"Well, it was like this. I didn't pass around the plates at all. They did that themselves. But I took away the used plates, and I just happened to notice that one of them, the one Mr. Steele had eaten from, had a sprinkling of queer-looking powder on it."

"On the food?"

"Partly on the food, and partly on the plate. As if the powder had been sprinkled on like salt."

"Perhaps it was salt."

"No, it wasn't white enough."

"What color was it?"

"Why, no color at all. Dull, grayish-like. If it had been on a white plate I couldn't have seen it. But it was on a Royal Worcester plate—that glazed blue, you know."

"Yes, I know. Tell me more about it."

"Well," Jenny was fairly started now, "you see, there are two ways from the dining-room to the kitchen—through the pantry, and through a little dark sort of passage. As the company was crowding the pantry, I slipped through the passage with a load of dishes. And this plate I'm telling you about was on top, and—the passage was a bit dark—whatever was on that plate shone faintly."

"Luminous in the semi-dark?"

"Yes, sir. I didn't think much about it, though I did notice it. But I was very busy, and I just piled the dishes in the sink, and went back for more. Then, when I turned on the water, of course, it all disappeared."

"Why didn't you tell the coroner this tale?"

"Because," Jenny faced him squarely, "because he was bound to pin the thing on Mrs. Steele, and I knew she didn't have a thing to do with it, but I was afraid if I told this, that horrid man would think she had a hand in it."

"You don't know that this powder you speak of was poison?"

"No, sir. But after all the talk about phosphorus-poisoning, and as it did shine in the dark ——"

"Jenny, your evidence is invaluable! It seems to me there is no doubt that the poison was given to Mr. Steele on the plate you describe. Now, who handled that plate?"

"I've no idea, sir. The ladies and gentlemen all passed things around, and, in the crowd, anybody could have sprinkled that stuff on, unnoticed."

"Then everyone at that supper can be suspected."

"That's just it, sir. But you won't let this hurt Mrs. Steele, will you?"

"She is already arrested ——"

"Oh, I know it, but she didn't do it! You must get her out!"

"There's only one way to do that, and that is, to find the person who did do it. You've no idea?"

"No, sir, I couldn't have. The plate was given to Mr. Steele by some one——"

"And not necessarily the one who poisoned it."

"No, not necessarily."

Stone looked at the girl curiously.

"You're very intelligent, Jenny. Why are you a waitress?"

"I don't want to be, but I couldn't get a position I liked. I want to be a secretary or librarian—I've a good education—but I had no—you know—no pull or influence of any sort."

"Well, well, you help me along with this investigation, and we'll see about finding some position for you. Now, what was on the plate that you saw the powder on? What food, I mean?"

"All sorts. Mr. Steele seemed to have had a helping of everything. There were salad, omelet, cheese, a sandwich, some olive pits and scraps of celery—well, pretty much everything that was on the table."

"Then he didn't eat much."

"Well, yes. There was but a small remnant of these things left. Now, that's all I know, Mr. Stone. May I be excused. My work is waiting for me."

"Yes, run along, Jenny. Tell no one—no one at all—what you have told me. I shall probably see you again soon, but mind, now, no chattering."

"No, sir," and with a serious face the girl went her way.

Feeling that he had taken a step in the right

direction, Stone called next for Netta, wondering if he could stem her tide of volubility.

The lady's maid appeared, trim and smart in her black and white, and Stone asked her to be seated.

"My heavens and earth," she began, with no thought of disrespect, "so you let that innercent lady be incarcerated! Well, if that isn't just like a lot of stupidary men! Why ——"

"Be quiet, Netta, I will do the talking. You will answer my questions as briefly as possible."

"Oh, I will, will I? All right, let's go."

"Tell me about the quarrel you overheard between Mr. and Mrs. Steele the night of the supper party."

"Well, I say! Do you think I can tell that briefly?"

"No, I don't. But be as brief as you can. Don't go over that doodad business—I know all about that. Tell me as to their actual quarrel, their ill-tempered speeches."

"Oh, them! Why, they was much as usual—the speeches, I mean."

"They often quarreled, then?"

"Oh, frequentarily. And always the same lingo. She wished she had never married him, and he said she'd be in a pretty pickle if she hadn't."

"What did he mean by that?"

"Lordy, how do I know?"

"You do know, and you may as well come across."

"Well, I don't know prezactly, but it musta been

that she married him for fear he'd tell something he knew about her."

"Some secret?"

"I s'pose. Leastways, their quar'ls always sounded like it was that way. Once she said, 'I wish I hadn't married you—just let you do your worstest.' And he said, 'Then you'd be behind bars now.' That's what he said."

"Are you sure of this, Netta?" asked Stone, gravely. "You're not exaggerating?"

"No, sir," said the girl, earnestly. "I'm certain sure. You see, it wasn't only oncet or twicet, but every now and again, they'd garble it over. And always he'd say if she hadn't married him, she'd be in pecks and heaps of trouble, and always she'd say she wished she'd chanced it. They never seemed to care that I heard them squabbling. They didn't notice me at all. But before comp'ny, they was always lovey-dovey, or, at least, perlite. Until lately, that is. Lately, he sorta took to ballyraggin' her before folks, and it riled her sumpin' fierce. And, lately, too, he soured on the child more. He never liked the baby, but he used to keep quiet about it. Lately, he lambasted the poor kid all the time."

"Then, of late, Mrs. Steele had more reason to resent her husband's attitudes than previously?"

"Well—yes, but that doesn't mean she killed him."

"Certainly not. Who did kill him?"

"Why, Mr. Stanhope, of course. He was sweet on Mrs. Steele before she married Mr. Steele, and,

of course, when Mr. Steele took to raking his wife over the coals, right before comp'ny, Mr. Stanhope, he saw it was time to remove the gent."

"That's all imagination. You have no proof or evidence of any sort."

"No, sir, I ain't. But you know what was in the note Mr. Steele left for his lawyer. Why, I saw her burn that note myself. I s'pose she didn't know there was a coplicate."

"You saw her burn it? Look here, are you witnessing against Mrs. Steele?"

"Nixy. I'm just tellin' the truth. I peeked through the keyhole and I saw her burn paper. And when I went in the room, it was full of burnin' smell and charred paper."

"Do you know anything else of definite importance?"

"No," Netta said, regretfully. "Nothin' definite and nothin' important. Just my luck, drat it!"

Stone believed her and sent her away, then, suddenly, recalled her.

"Just a moment, Netta. Do you know anything about Mrs. Steele's hearing mysterious music at night?"

"Lordy, yes." The girl smiled, but with a look of fear in her eyes, too. "It's the Ha'ant, you know."

"Have you ever heard it?"

"No, sir, but I'm never in her room after she's in bed."

"What is it she hears? Music?"

"Yes, sir, always the same song."

"Do you know the song? How does it go?"

"I don't know the words—they're Spanish. But I kinda know the tune, 'cause Mrs. Steele hums it sometimes, when I'm a-brushing of her hair. It goes like this, sorta."

Netta crooned a slow, sweet melody, like a dreamy waltz, or a lilting serenade. It was as seductive as a Strauss or Lehar composition, and it immediately aroused a haunting memory in Stone's brain. Where had he heard that air before? But, try as he would, he couldn't place it, and, though not really familiar, he was certain it was not entirely new to him. Dismissing Netta, with strict injunctions to repeat no word she had told him, he started off to visit Irma Steele.

The county jail, not a long run from Kavanagh, was a forbidding-looking place, but Irma had been allowed some special privileges and her cell was filled with flowers and fruits and books and other gifts from her friends, and even from interested and sympathetic strangers.

She greeted Stone with a simple cordiality, and he marveled at her self-control and poise.

"I won't waste time," he said, compassing the situation at a glance, "in useless expressions of regret at these conditions. I am here to help you, and I want you to realize that the matter is not by any means past help."

He was pleased at the new animation that showed in her eyes at this speech.

"You see, Mrs. Steele, your being here is not at

all a final gesture, and it may prove a beneficial one. I know it's hard for you to see that, but trust me for a little, and we may bring order out of chaos. But you must be absolutely frank with me, or my hands are tied."

"I will be frank," said Irma Steele, in a voice that was as grave as any Bible oath could be.

"Just why were you acquitted by that jury in Algeciras?"

"Because it could not be proved that I had, with my own hands, given to my husband food or drink that contained poison."

"Then it was not for lack of an English-speaking jury?"

"That, too. The interpreter was very incompetent, and, too, I think he was prejudiced in my favor. The Spanish men hate to denounce a woman. I probably owe my acquittal to their chivalry and consideration. Also, to lack of evidence and lack of complete understanding of English."

"But none of these things helped in this second case."

"No. Moreover, this second case was doomed from the start because of the first case. It rather stands to reason that a jury would feel a prejudice against a suspect who had been through the same routine before."

"Right. And, also, they could prove that you had opportunity, motive and accessibility to the means."

"That is all true, and, besides that, though I've not heard it mentioned yet, I could have adminis-

tered poison to Mr. Steele that night after the guests had all gone home."

"Certainly. I'm glad you see and understand all these points. It makes it easier to discount them. Now, Mrs. Steele, we know you are innocent. We are going to free you, but it cannot be done in a day. Much as we regret it, you may have to remain here for some time."

"And I wouldn't mind, were it not for my baby. Oh, Mr. Stone, can't I have my little girl? I can't live, if I don't."

"Oh, yes, you can live. Now, I'll do all I can. I'll move heaven and earth, as far as possible, to get you your wish, but it is very doubtful. So, please, tell me what you want done as to the child in the meantime? Do you want Mrs. Mersereau left in charge of the house? Or Mrs. Tenney?"

Irma smiled sadly.

"I've talked to both those women, and they can't take such a task. Mrs. Tenney has too many other interests and no time to spare, while Mrs. Mersereau wants to leave because of the unpleasant notoriety it will bring her to stay. I seem to have only fair-weather friends."

"There is no one who is willing to care for the child and take charge of the house while you are absent, then?"

"I think no one feels that my absence is temporary. However, Mrs. Delano did say that if I could get no one else, she would take things over for a time."

"You would like that?"

"I'd be glad to have anyone. The servants are all capable, but they need a head over them. Both the butler and the housekeeper are too high-strung to manage things without continual friction. If Mrs. Delano will go, I'll be grateful to her. Perhaps you would see her about it. My lawyer—I have only Mr. Wilcox—is not very satisfactory about such things."

"Yes, indeed, I'll see Mrs. Delano, and probably bring it about. Now, a few other questions. First, about the mysterious music. You consider it the haunting promised you by Mr. Darcy?"

"I have always done so, but ——" Irma looked a little embarrassed, "I begin to think it may be music caused by natural, material means."

"And what brought about this change of opinion?"

"First, because I felt ashamed of myself for believing in that idea of haunting; and, too, because I heard somebody whistling that air since I have been here."

"Last night?"

"Yes, last night. Not late, as usual, and not played on an instrument as usual, but just a low humming or crooning of the song."

"Will you hum it, that I may know how it runs?"

Irma sang for him, in a low voice, the beautiful, romantic song—the sad story of the parted lovers, and the recurring refrain echoed on the wings of the wind, "Ya en el mundo no tengo otro bien."

That is, "In this world I no longer have anything to make me happy."

"A haunting air," said Stone, as the last soft note died away. "And did Mr. Darcy say he would haunt you by that song?"

"Yes, he did. I cannot disbelieve the evidence of my senses, yet I cannot believe in the supernatural."

"What about the Dercia Curse?"

"Oh, there's nothing supernatural about that. It's a curse, the same as many old families live under. You can believe it or not. It only bothers me because my baby is to-day the youngest Dercia. If I could have her with me, I could shield her, but there may be—it is a possibility—there may be some of the Dercia clan who would do her harm, and let it be ascribed to the Curse."

Fleming Stone looked at her with infinite sadness in his deep eyes.

"When you left your home to seek adventure, you certainly found it," he observed.

"I surely did," she gravely agreed.

"I suppose if you were to see flaming ice or burning snow, the Curse would be quashed for all time," he suggested.

"I suppose so," she said, wearily. "In that case, the evildoers, and there are some among the Dercias, would realize they couldn't fasten their own misdeeds on the Curse. But I can't look forward hopefully to seeing the miracles you mention."

"No, I've never seen them," said Stone, speaking abstractedly. "Well, I must go now. I'll see you

again soon. Meantime, don't show the white feather. You've been so wonderful—keep it up! Mr. Stanhope will be coming soon, I daresay."

On his departure, Stone went at once to see Lily Mersereau. To his surprise he found that volatile person had concluded to stay at "The Oriels" for the duration, as she expressed it, of Irma's absence.

When inquired of concerning her change of mind, she said, simply, and with obvious truth, that she didn't want to give over that pleasant and lucrative position to Rita Delano. Moreover, she stated, if Rita Delano could brave whatever criticism or stigma might be attached to the situation, she could certainly brave it as well as Mrs. Delano, having, herself, a much better reputation to start with.

These were not her carefully chosen words, but these were the sentiments Stone gathered. He was relieved at this settlement of the matter, and expressed a hope that Lily would find pleasure and content in the lovely home and in the knowledge that she was meeting Irma's wishes.

As the detective walked through the grounds on his way out, he saw the child and the nurse, and with them the strange, lanky figure of Oscar Percy Mott.

He wondered at this, and went toward the group.

"Good morning, Babykins," he said. "You out for a romp?"

"No, sir," said Pansy Ann. "Here to see Oskey. Dis my Oskey."

She pointed to Mott with an air of proprietorship

that made Stone open his eyes. How could they let that dainty small person have anything to do with the far from attractive half-wit?

"Does her mother allow this?" he asked, in a low tone, of the nurse.

"She doesn't approve, but she doesn't forbid it," was the whispered reply.

Somehow penetrating his clouded brain, Mott said, mildly, "Oh, I'll not hurt her. I like her. Candy, you?"

"Yes, Oscar, come along with me. We'll get some candy."

"Soft candy, sir?"

"Yes, of course." They walked on, without talking, Stone in deep silence, and the half-witted Mott idly humming a low, melodious tune.

They went to the shop, bought marshmallows and Turkish paste, and then Stone dismissed his companion, telling him to go home, and not to go back to "The Oriels."

"But I look after her—the baby," said the staring lad, his vacant eyes filled with anxiety.

"She has care, you needn't look after her."

"Not enough care. Bad lady—very bad lady——"

"Who? Mrs. Mersereau?"

"Names—what are names? Nothing; I know them not. But the baby is in danger. Oscar knows."

A wide, vacuous smile made his face so utterly blank of intelligence that Stone pushed from his mind all idea of the boy really meaning anything

and repeated his directions for him to go straight to his own home and stay there.

"Yes, sir; yes, sir, I obey. Good-bye, sir."

He turned and shambled off, again humming that sweet, musical air.

But he was out of sight, down the road, before Fleming Stone realized that it was the Spanish ballad, "Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo"! And that it was hummed truly, flawlessly, by the village idiot, Oscar Percy Mott!

Chapter XV

*"I've wisdom from the East and from the West,
That's subject to no academic rule;
You may find it in the jeering of a jest,
Or distill it from the folly of a fool."*

W. S. GILBERT.

IT WAS two days later that Stone was having a talk with Mark Stanhope. The younger man was disappointed that more progress had not been made on the case, and the detective was far from blaming him.

"I frankly admit," Stone said, "that, so far, we have nothing to work on but surmise, speculation, imagination and guess-work. There are few clues and less evidence. But don't despair, Stanhope, some cases require slow and wary moves, while others almost solve themselves. I am convinced that Mrs. Steele is the victim of a deep-laid and diabolical plot. But I can't yet get the motive. I can't think the criminal had reason to kill those two men, so widely separate as to time, place and degree. I am inclined to believe that the enmity of the criminal is more probably directed against Mrs. Steele, and the intention is to get her in bad. This plan failed to work in the first instance, therefore the villains tried it again."

"Then," said Mark, thinking quickly, "that lets

out any member of the house of Dercia, or anyone connected with Steele."

"Well, not entirely. Say it's one of the Dercia crowd, who has some way of getting back the Dercia fortune if Carlos Dercia's wife can be eliminated. There then stands only the little child between the villain and the inheritance. And our black-hearted criminal wouldn't stop at that small barrier."

Mark shuddered. He hated to think of Irma being connected with a family of cutthroats. He said so, and Stone responded:

"But the Spanish nature is not like ours. Throat-cutting is second nature to them."

"Ugh! I wonder a lovely girl like Irma could marry a Spaniard!"

"Don't wonder at that. Love-making is also second nature to them. And I gather from Mrs. Steele that Carlos Dercia was a brave wooer. His passion swept her off her feet, and the simple-natured American girl was enchanted with the glowing future painted by the soft-voiced lover, under the witching moon. Have you ever been to Algeciras?"

"No," said Mark, shortly. He did not like these tales of Irma's lover.

"Do you know anyone who has? This is important."

"Fenn has. I don't know of anyone else, except Irma."

"The nurse?"

"No, she was engaged after Irma bought 'The Oriels.'"

"Well, here's the situation. Whoever is responsible for the death of Dercia is also responsible for the death of Steele. I don't say the same hand administered the poison, but the mind back of the crime—the master criminal—is one person, and he isn't yet through with his dreadful work. Unless we get him, there will be another murder, and soon."

"Irma?" Stanhope whispered, in an agony of fear.

"One beside her. If she is not rescued in time, she will count as another."

"You will rescue her?"

"I am trying my very best, Mark. But I am working in the dark. What do you know about that man, Black?"

"Not much. No one here has ever seen him. He is arriving to-morrow, I believe. Wilcox wrote him of his legacy, and he replied that he was coming here. Why?"

"Nothing much. Of course, he couldn't have known Dercia, and so he can't be implicated. He might have killed Steele to get the bequest——"

"But he's 'way off in Seattle, or some such place."

"He could have sent the poison by mail, with some plausible argument to induce Steele to swallow it. But, as I said, we've only conjecture."

Stone did not tell of the revelations of Jenny concerning the powder on Steele's supper plate, for, though he had confidence in Stanhope's promises, yet young people are sometimes caught off their guard and disclose secrets without meaning to do so.

The whole case was so baffling, so difficult of solution, that Fleming Stone was, as he sometimes said, walking delicately, like Agag. Within the last twenty-four hours he had seen his first ray of light—a faint illumination of the darkness, but still a positive hint. This he meant to follow up.

"Can't you find out who bought phosphorus lately?" asked Mark, feeling that in a detective story this would be the first step.

"Not with our criminal running the show. Though I'm surprised that it hasn't as yet been planted on somebody."

"It was planted on Irma by that box of headless matches."

"Yes, and that's what clinched the jury's decision. The foreman told me so. But it couldn't convince anyone with even a modicum of brains. It was too palpably a plant. Imagine Mrs. Steele using those match heads for a murderous purpose and then putting the box of sticks in her own bureau drawer! I didn't think it would fool anybody, but it did for the jury. Yet, it is better that Mrs. Steele is where she is. At least, she is safe."

Stone looked so deeply distressed that Mark forbore to tell of his own anguish at Irma's fate.

"You spoke of Black as a possible suspect because of his inheritance," Mark said. "Why not suspect Fenn for the same reason?"

"There is a possibility of Fenn," Stone agreed. "I've no evidence, of course, but there are a few

points. You know Fenn was unwilling to be Mrs. Steele's lawyer."

"Yes, I thought that odd."

"It was odd. But it isn't enough to arrest him on. Tell me more of this John Black. He's coming soon?"

"Yes, to-night, or to-morrow morning. I've heard Irma say he's grim and grum and gloomy. Not a prepossessing description."

"I'm anxious to see him. Will you bring it about, as soon as possible?"

"Yes, of course. Do you think him the key to the puzzle?"

"No, son. The key is but one letter."

"An anonymous letter?"

"To me, as yet, yes. But it is one of the first seven letters of the alphabet."

"Help! When you go cryptic, I give you up!"

Mark chose to assume a lightness he was far from feeling, because Stone was so alarmingly depressed that Stanhope feared he would give up the job. Of course, he did not know how impossible it would be for the puppy at the root to cease pulling, but Stone was quite evidently disheartened.

After Mark left him, the detective sat for a long time, wondering what way to turn. In his opinion, there was no doubt that the criminal had been at the supper party. Then, he told himself, it must be the least likely one. That's an immutable law.

Thinking it over, he concluded that, except for

the two youngsters, Serena Tenney was the least likely one, and he started off to call on her.

She received him with her usual cheeriness and cordiality, but she seemed a little ill at ease. To his questions she returned prompt and straightforward replies. She had no helpful opinions as to a possible poisoner at the party, and she didn't believe the phosphorus had been administered during the supper.

"But suppose I tell you that I know it was given to Mr. Steele at the supper," Stone said.

"You know that to be a fact?" Mrs. Tenney's eyes opened wide.

"As nearly as I can know anything from hearsay evidence."

"Then, it must have been Austin Fenn. For no one else had a motive."

"Mark Stanhope had. Mrs. Steele had."

"Those two! If you suspect them, sir, you're unworthy the name of detective! They are in love, of course, but they are the exalted type, the sort who would suffer in silence before they would accept a happiness founded on crime! Have you no psychology? Are you an ordinary detective?"

Stone smiled at her ranting manner, and checked her flow of speech.

"No," he returned, quietly, "I am not an 'ordinary' detective. I have proved my worth, and, without undue vanity, I am proud of my successes."

"Good for you!" exclaimed Serena. "I hate people with an inferiority complex. Now, can I help?"

"Yes; give me a photograph of yourself, and can you also give me pictures of any of the other guests at the Sunday night supper?"

"Well!" Serena stared at him. "No, you're not an ordinary detective! Well, I can give you several of them—not all. Do I get them back?"

"Yes, and unharmed. Now, can you get for me the ones you haven't?"

"I don't think so. I haven't any of the women-folks. You see, I only care for pictures of my men friends."

She held her head on one side, and drooped her eyelids like a superannuated vamp. It was the first time Stone had seen her look really old.

"But I'll tell you how to get them," she went on. "That youngster, Pat Raymond, will get them for you. She's a camera fan, and she's everlastingly snap-shotting her friends. If she hasn't them, she'll take them for you."

"Good! I'll ask her. What can you give me?"

Mrs. Tenney produced a large Florentine portfolio that did duty as an album, and soon handed over fine photographs of Mark Stanhope, Wyatt Steele, Austin Fenn, Ray Booth and Colvin Kane, also a stunningly handsome dark man unknown to Stone.

"Who's this?" he asked, with interest.

"That's Carlos Dercia—or Charles Darcy."

"Why in your possession?"

"Irma gave it to me. She didn't want it, she said."

"Well, I'll take it, if I may. I don't need Steele's—yes, I'll keep that, too. Thank you lots, Mrs. Tenney. And I promise a safe return of these, though, perhaps, not very soon."

"Oh, all right. But as a return favor, you must tell me what you're doing. How are you coming on?"

"Slowly, but that often means surely. Do you know this John Black?"

"No, but I've heard he's a most impossible sort."

"Impossible, how?"

"Oh, grouchy, morose, fiery-tempered—all that's objectionable."

"Still, if he turns out to be the murderer, we won't mind what manner of man he is."

"I heard Wyatt Steele describe him once, and he could pass for a murderer, all right."

"Well, he's the first one, then, who has measured up to the standard. None of these chaps look like criminals," he ruffled the photographs through his fingers. "Not even your pick, Fenn."

"But I thought that idea of 'looking like a murderer' was all poppycock?"

"To a degree, yes. But there are indications. Now, for all his Spanish physiognomy, Dercia doesn't look like a murderer. More like a troubadour."

"Yes, that's so."

"But I must get the others from little Patricia. I want the women."

"Good heavens! You don't suspect a woman!"

"Mrs. Steele?"

"Nonsense, you're as thoroughly convinced of her innocence as I am myself, and I can't say more than that."

"Mrs. Mersereau? Mrs. Delano?"

"Not brains enough, either of them. I'm the only brainy one in the crowd, except Irma."

"I wish I weren't so sure of your innocence. You'd make a grand suspect."

"Yes, Lucrezia Borgia type!"

"Will you give me your picture, or shall I get it from the little girl?"

"Oho! So you *do* suspect me after all!"

"Suspect is too strong a word, but I dare not overlook any bet."

She found a picture for him—a very good photograph, taken some years ago—but Stone seemed satisfied, and, thanking her, he went his way.

He left his packet of pictures at the Inn and went on to Pat Raymond's house. The girl was so serious and intelligent about the matter that Stone was delighted. He had expected a lot of questions and mistaken conclusions.

But Pat seemed to think her help was asked in good faith, and in good faith she promised to get what Stone wanted. She agreed it would be easy for her to do this, as she continually asked her friends to pose for her camera work, and, indeed, she had several of the desired pictures already.

So satisfactory was she that Stone, guardedly, broached another subject.

She was interested, and listened with attention.

"But," he said, "can you keep the secret? Can you assure me that you will not, in a moment of forgetfulness, say anything that might cause suspicion? Can you answer for Kane?"

Pat answered "yes" to all these questions, and answered in such a way as to convince the somewhat skeptical Stone of her sincerity and determination.

"All right," he said, "I'll see you and Kane together soon, and we'll fix it all up. You're a great help to me."

Pat glowed with joy at this praise from the great detective, and she watched him out of sight, and then went in the house for her camera.

It was the next day that John Black arrived in Kavanagh.

His appearance was suggestive of an army with banners. Wilcox was at the station to meet him, and, though unobtrusively standing behind a pillar of the train shed, Fleming Stone was there, too.

He watched when a big, breezy sort of man left the train and looked about with interest.

"Mr. Black?" said the lawyer's suave voice, and, as the big man nodded, he said, "So glad to greet you. Sad occasion, though. Matters very unfortunate."

Stone, overhearing, thought that unfortunate was

a mild word to use for the awful fate hanging over Irma Steele.

Wilcox guided the newcomer to his own car, and Stone disappeared, resolving to have an interview with this man as soon as possible. He saw no trace of the grimness or grumpiness attributed to Black. On the contrary, he gave every appearance of a frank, probably blunt, Westerner, fond of his own way and ready with his own opinions.

Stone's interest in the man was not idle curiosity. He wanted to learn whether he showed any promise of help, and it seemed to the detective that he did. He might be able to shed some light on Wyatt Steele's death not available from any other source.

If not—if John Black proved a broken reed—then, Stone thought, the case would be serious—very serious indeed.

That very afternoon, having learned that John Black had domiciled himself at "The Oriels," Fleming Stone went over there.

He had no difficulty in getting an interview.

The big man, his costume correct, but carelessly worn, received him in the sun-parlor.

"Hello," Black boomed, in a loud but melodious voice, "you the detective, eh?"

"Yes, are you one, too?"

"Ha, ha! That's good! Now, what made you think of that?"

"You look it—it sticks out all over you."

This was pure fairy-tale, for Black looked not the least mite like a detective, but Stone sensed that

it would please him, and to please this man was the paramount wish, just then, of Fleming Stone.

"Well, well, is that so? Now, young man, I'm sorry to put you in the wrong, but I haven't a scrap of detective instinct about me. Ha, ha!"

"Don't want to acknowledge it, eh? Well, let it go at that. Now, Mr. Black, why did you come here? To collect your money?"

Black stared at him.

"So you're that sort," he said. "And I thought I had a monopoly of all bluntness and rudeness!"

"I am blunt, but I'm not rude, and you mustn't misunderstand."

"All right, I won't," and John Black's eyes twinkled a little. "Well, then, since you kindly inquire, I didn't come for my inheritance. That could be sent to me. I came to see about this matter of arresting Wyatt Steele's wife. You know a thing or two. Is that woman guilty?"

"Absolutely not."

"I thought not. I saw her picture in the paper, and I said, 'Never!' Why, she's a saint—that woman!"

"Saints are usually dead ——"

"And she will be, unless something happens pretty sudden!"

"You are right. The situation is acute."

"And getting acuter every day. Now, are you willing to tell me all you know?"

"Shortly, I think—as soon as I am convinced

beyond all question of your good faith in the matter."

"That's right, I'm cautious myself."

"First, then, why did they represent you as a grumpy old sourface?"

"Who did that?"

"I'm not sure, but I think the description originated with Wyatt Steele."

"I'll bet it did! He always hated me. He left me that money because it was mine by rights, anyway. I had lent it to him years ago, and he merely gave back my own with a decent interest. He and I were never friends, and I daresay I was grumpy when with him. But never mind that. Let's get on to see what can be done about his wife. Can she be got out?"

"I fear not, unless we find the real murderer. I think—I *hope* I am on the track, but it is a difficult track, and I'm liable to lose the way. Do you want me to run over the case with you?"

"That's what I'm here for. Go to it."

And for the next two hours the two men were busily engaged in plans for the release of Irma Steele and the conviction of a real criminal. The fact that they didn't know the name of the real criminal failed to deter them from their purpose.

Then callers began to come, insistent on seeing John Black, and as that self-willed personage wanted to see them, there was a general reception.

He wanted to meet everybody, and he made friends at once with them all. Surely his smile was

far from grumpy, and his manner anything but grim.

Especially did he like young people, and Pat Raymond and Colly Kane adopted him for all time. Lily Mersereau, as acting hostess, had the time of her life. She was a charming chatelaine, and did the honors prettily, though always with a subdued air, as if in sad memory of the absent Irma.

Once the party was well under way, Fleming Stone slipped out and went home. In his room at the Inn he suddenly developed an extraordinary activity. He telephoned, he telegraphed, he wrote letters, and he did some hasty packing.

His mail arrived, and quickly he tore open the letters, throwing most of them aside.

One letter gave him pause. He read it through several times. Yet it was an anonymous letter, and who has not heard that such are good only for the waste basket?

It read thus:

"Mr. Flemming Stone: You are making a mistake to remain here. Take the advice of a friend and go away while you can get away. You know what we mean. If you remain in Kavanagh, your life is in danger. We are desperate, and we do not propose to have you show us up. You are getting too near the truth to please us, and you must understand that it is up to you to drop the Steele case, go away from here, and live happy ever after, or—remain here and go away in a casket."

There was no signature. The paper was of good quality and the typewritten page was well-typed and

well-spelled. The only error was the spelling of Stone's first name, which was not surprising.

As he looked at the communication, his eyes narrowed, and he examined it more closely. Then, rising, he got another letter and compared the two.

As he had anticipated, they were written on the same machine. The letter that had caused Doctor Campbell to revise his diagnosis of the death of Wyatt Steele and this present missive were positively the work of the same typewriter, if not the same manipulator thereof.

He scrutinized more closely still, and concluded they had been done by the same hand. There are individual peculiarities in typing as in penmanship, and Stone noted such in the two specimens before him.

Yet he would not depend on his own decision—the matter must be laid before an expert. He read the letter again, and concluded to leave Kavanagh. It was not pleasant to think of going away in a casket—he gave a little shiver at the idea.

But he must see a few people first. He picked up his telephone and made one call after another.

Later, people came to see him. He had important, if hasty interviews with several callers. He finally said good night to the last one, and sought his belated couch.

But the next morning he arose with the sun, and busily continued his packing. He strapped his trunks, tied tags on them, and with only a suitcase in his

hand, he went downstairs so early that no one was about but the employees.

"Hello, Jim," he said to the hall porter, "I'm checking out. Tell Mr. Phillips to send my bill after me. Here's my office address. And you forward my trunks as soon as may be. They're all ready, up in my room."

"Nothing unsatisfactory, sir?"

"Oh, no. If anyone inquires, say I received an important letter and had to leave Kavanagh at once."

"Yes, sir."

"And Jim," he spoke in a low tone, "can you get this letter to Mrs. Steele without the authorities knowing it?"

"Trust me, sir."

"All right, do so." And with a parting *douceur* of goodly size, Fleming Stone went away.

Chapter XVI

*"Heighdy! Heighdy!
Misery me—lackadaydee!
He sipped no sup and he craved no crumb,
As he sighed for the love of a lady!"*

W. S. GILBERT.

LATER on, that same morning, Ray Booth appeared at the Inn and asked for Fleming Stone.

"He isn't here, sir," said the hall porter. "He checked out early this morning."

"He did? He left a forwarding address, I suppose?"

"No, sir, except that his trunks are to be sent after him."

"I wanted to see him very much," said Booth, frowning. "I'd like to go up to his room—perhaps he left a note there for me. We are working together on the Steele case, you see, and the matter is very important."

"Well, Mr. Booth, I don't know any reason why you shouldn't go up to a vacant room. Go ahead, if you wish. Number 216."

So the amateur detective mounted the stairs to the room vacated by the professional detective, hoping to glean some information regarding this sudden departure.

The sitting-room looked as any vacated hotel room might. The bedroom showed plainly that

Stone had slept there and had gone off in haste, if the towels flung on the bathroom floor and the litter of boxes, paper and string could be considered evidence.

Booth glanced about and returned to the sitting-room. There was little to be gathered here, but he was curious as to this sudden move on Stone's part, and he wondered, if the great detective had really gone for good, whether he would now be in full charge of the case.

There were quantities of ashes in various ash-receivers, from which Ray deduced guests the night before. But this meant little, and he turned his attention to the waste basket, which he had learned was, or ought to be, the detective's happy hunting ground.

Nor was he entirely unrewarded.

He drew forth from among the scraps a crumpled, but untorn letter, which was the anonymous epistle Stone had received the night before.

"H'm," mused Booth, as he read the somewhat threatening lines, "then he preferred the railroad train to the casket. Scared off! Well, I can't blame him. This is pretty definite."

He smoothed out the note, folded it and put it in his pocket. Then he went on with his search. He found little of interest save two letters which were begun and evidently discarded.

One opened with "Dear Friend," and went on to say that circumstances had arisen which made it imperative for him to leave Kavanagh at once. But

no more was said, as the writer had obviously decided to throw it away and make a fresh start.

Another began "Dear Jack," and informed Jack that he was leaving Kavanagh at once, and could, if desired, take up the Coulson case. But this, too, was unfinished, crumpled into a ball and thrown away.

Still, Booth seemed satisfied with his haul, and his eyes gleamed as he realized that now he could conduct the investigations, and would not be under the supercilious observation of the great Fleming Stone.

A little unjust, this, for Stone was not really supercilious, or, at least, not outwardly so. But Booth felt his own inferiority, and seldom expressed an opinion before the professional detective.

Another scrap garnered from the waste basket was a newspaper clipping telling of a detective who scorned to pay any attention to an anonymous letter, and was incontinently killed by a gunman.

"Well, discretion is the better part of valor," Booth told himself. "I suppose Stone cares as much about saving his skin as the rest of us. And, anyway, I imagine he had got to the end of his rope in the Steele case. With the lady in jail, and the unqualified verdict against her, what could he do? For that matter, what can I do? There's one way to free Irma, but—dare I chance it? It'll take some thinking over. Thank heaven there's time for thought! The trial can't come off inside a month, and, by that time, maybe—and, maybe not!"

With which cryptic decision, he gave a final look

around the rooms, found nothing more of interest, and, taking away only the anonymous letter, he departed.

He went then to see Mark Stanhope.

"Do you know," he began, "your precious detective has decamped?"

"What do you mean?" asked Stanhope, who looked utterly blank at the other's assertion.

"Just that. Mr. Stone has vanished, vamoosed, evaporated, from the Inn that erstwhile harbored his august person."

"Why, he was there last evening ——"

"And this morning he is not there. That's life. Here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"Quit your foolery, and tell me what you mean. I daresay he has run down to New York."

"That, doubtless. But I daresay he is still running. Well, if you want to get at the true inwardness of his disappearance, read that."

Booth handed him the anonymous letter and waited.

Mark read it over twice and then said, slowly, "You don't think Fleming Stone ran away because of that?"

"Exactly what I do think. What do you think?"

"That he threw that letter away without a second thought. That he has gone to the city on an errand and will return when he gets ready."

"He won't get ready. Listen to other notes I found in his waste basket."

Booth quoted the gist of the unfinished letters

that Stone had begun and discarded, and Mark was obliged to say that they sounded very much as if he had gone off for good.

"But he would have told us," he said. "It isn't like him to go off without a word."

"Panicky. The best of us will quail before threats of extinction."

"Time will tell," and Stanhope looked gloomy. "Well, what are we going to do?"

"What am I going to do, you mean. I shall take charge of the case, and if, when and as Mr. Stone returns, I can gracefully turn it back to his tender care. But I daren't let matters drop, for Irma must be rescued ——"

"Irma?" said Mark, bristling at this hint of intimacy.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Steele. You see, I care for her, too."

He spoke in a wistful, but not a hopeful tone, and Mark was sorry he had reproved him. Who could help loving Irma?

"Oh, all right," he said, a bit embarrassed, "I can't blame you. Now as you say, what's to be done?"

"I feel very strongly that Mr. Stone does not intend to return to this case, so I feel that it is my duty to carry on. Of course, Mrs. Steele is the first one to be considered, so I'm going to see her, and I shall be guided by what she thinks."

"Your end and aim being, to get her freed of this unjust and false arrest?"

"Yes, what else?"

"You realize, don't you, that no power on earth can free her but to find the true murderer?"

"Oh, no, I don't altogether admit that. If we can prove she didn't have any hand in her husband's death, we don't have to find out who did."

"I don't see it just that way, but if you do, go ahead. I'm going over to see John Black. I've rather taken a notion to that man."

"I can't stand him! An uncouth, boorish type."

"Well, yes, a diamond in the rough. But full of sympathy and possessed of sound judgment."

"Maybe so. All right, Stanhope, go your way and I'll go mine. But, believe me, I'll free that wronged woman, and I'll do it quicker than your friend Stone could have done."

"Aren't you afraid the anonymous letter-writer will get after you? It is certainly some one opposed to Irma."

"No, I'm not afraid. And if I were, I should stand by my guns. I don't show the white feather."

With which burst of scorn for the absent Stone, Booth went off, whistling.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mark, but he elucidated no further.

At the jail, Booth easily obtained access to Mrs. Steele.

"I'm sorry to tell you," her visitor said, gently, "but you have lost your advocate."

"What do you mean?" asked Irma, listlessly.

She was courteous of manner, but seemed to have no care as to his news or anything else.

"Fleming Stone has run away."

"That's an odd expression to use. Run away from what?"

"From battle, murder and sudden death, as near as I can make out."

"Then I'm glad he has escaped."

Booth looked at her quickly, for her tone was bitter, and he felt sure that she was feeling utter despair.

"But don't be too cast down," he went on, cheerfully. "I'm going to work on the case, and I can't help feeling that I shall succeed where Fleming Stone has failed."

"He hasn't failed!"

"He has disappeared, and that always means a confession of guilt or failure."

"And you're going to step into his shoes?"

Irma's tone was colorless, her voice without inflection. It seemed to Booth she spoke as one in whose heart all hope was dead.

"Not that. I've no desire to wear his shoes. But I mean to stand on my own feet, and get you freed of this terrible, this wicked accusation."

"Can you?" She still spoke in that listless, apathetic way that was decidedly a wet blanket to Booth's enthusiasm.

"I hope so, but I must count on your help."

"How can I help?"

"By cheering me on, not by showing so plainly your lack of faith in my efforts."

"Very well, tell me your plans, your theories, your progress so far."

"I can't, unless you will let me tell you something else first. Let me tell you how I love you, how I adore you—give me the merest gleam of hope, and then, I can go forth to victory, like the knights of old ——"

He glanced up, to catch the vestige of a hovering smile on Irma's lips. A smile of—he could not be mistaken—of derision. Yet that he couldn't believe.

"Forgive me," he said, "I ought not to be so precipitate."

"It isn't that," and now Irma smiled, openly; "but you must admit this is an odd situation. How can you ask for hope, how can you profess to love a woman who is already in the shadow of the scaffold? You know there is no hope for me, you know I cannot escape my impending doom, and yet you offer me love and adoration."

"Because they are in my heart for you. Because, if you accept them, if you give me a glint of hope, I will—I *can*—set you free from this place."

"You can set me free?" she said, incredulously.

"I think so."

"Yet you believe me guilty."

"That is outside the argument."

"I see. You will free me by some secret means, but you will not do it unless I give you—how much hope is it? A gleam? A glint?"

"More than that! I want all—all the glorious sunshine of your love. Oh Irma, I worship you so! I did while Steele lived, but I hid my passion then. Now you are free—from marriage bonds—promise yourself to me, and I will free you from these legal shackles."

"Ray Booth," Irma looked at him, "you are either the best man in the world—or the worst. I cannot give you love—my heart is another's—but if you can free me from this cell, and do so, even though I must refuse your love, you are the best man in the world! If you can free me, and refuse to do so—you are the worst!"

"Then I am the worst," and Booth faced her squarely. "You have roused a demon, Irma. You torment me beyond all bounds when you tell me you love another. Of course, I know it is Stanhope. Do you think for a minute I will save your life for him! No—a thousand noes! Men are not like that. Love me, and you live; refuse me, and you die. That is my ultimatum."

"Then, you are a murderer."

"So be it. Then I am. But I'll give you time to think it over. For your own sake, for your child's sake, think it over well. I'm not a bad sort, dear. I'd be kind and indulgent, not at all like Steele. Forget Mark and remember that I love you and I can save you. Good-bye."

"Wait a minute. If you can save me, then you know who the real murderer is."

"That is my secret. I offer you freedom and

happiness. For I could make you happy, I swear it. Think it over well."

He went away leaving Irma in a nervous, worried state. She wished Fleming Stone had not gone away. She wished Booth hadn't told her all that lingo. She wished, most of all, that she could have her baby with her. She wondered if Lily was really taking good care of her, if the nurse remained faithful and as careful as ever.

And so on, through the long, weary day, Irma suffered all the pangs an anxious mother can feel, in addition to her own appalling trouble.

Mark, at "The Oriels," was closeted with John Black.

But that worthy man, with all the best wishes and good intentions in the world, could be of no real or definite help. He couldn't and didn't believe that Irma had poisoned Steele, but he could suggest no other suspect. He mentioned Fenn, but said, frankly, he had no reason to suspect him except the fact that he didn't like the man and didn't trust him. This was not much to work on and Mark didn't try. He had come principally to see how the child was getting on, for he had heard she was not well.

The nurse was summoned, and she admitted that her little charge was a bit under the weather.

"Nothing much," the nurse declared, looking worried, however. "Just a listless way with her. Not much appetite and not much interest in things. I've had the doctor, but he says she's all right."

"My heavens!" Mark said, as she went away, "if that little one should peak and pine, and if she should die, that would be the end of Irma! She is mortally afraid of that Curse."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed John Black. "Sheer poppy-cock!"

"Of course, I agree to that, but Irma doesn't, and if the child gets ill I wouldn't answer for the mother. I think she'd lose her mind."

"Shucks, minds aren't lost so easily!"

And then Wicks came with a strange message.

"That Mott is here," he said. "He insists on seeing Mr. Stanhope. What shall I do?"

"Send him in," returned Mark, promptly. "I'll see him."

The half-wit shuffled into the room, and sat down on the extreme edge of a small, straight chair.

"I want to see you," he said. "I want to tell."

"Yes," Mark encouraged him, while John Black watched interestedly.

"The baby," Mott said, looking troubled, "—the beauty baby."

"Little Pansy Ann," prompted Mark. "What about her?"

"She is sick —— She will be sicker."

The lad's tone more than his words carried a dread conviction. He sounded like a boy Cassandra, foretelling woe.

"What is making her sick?" Mark tried to speak unemotionally, though he was greatly startled.

"The lady ——" was the reply. "The bad lady."

"Yes, I see. And what does the lady do to the baby?"

"She puts sugar on her food, but it is not sugar."

"Salt, maybe."

"No, it is not salt; it is badness, wickedness; it will kill the beauty baby!"

"This must be looked into!" shouted John Black, rising from his chair. "Who is this fellow! What does he know?"

"Please, Mr. Black," Mark adjured him, "this is Oscar Mott——"

"Oscar Percy Mott," put in the owner of the euphonious name.

"Yes," Mark said, "Oscar Percy Mott. He is a good friend of Pansy Ann's, and if he has noticed something wrong he will tell us about it. But he does not like to be interrupted."

"No," and Mott beamed his satisfaction. "Let me tell it. Candy, you?"

"Well, no," Mark said, "but you tell us all about this thing, and I'll take you straightaway to get some candy."

"Straightaway—that's a nice word," and Oscar Percy beamed.

"Yes, a nice word. Now, go ahead. Who is the lady who sprinkles sugar or something on the baby's food?"

"Oh, I don't know! I can't learn the ladies' names. But she does do it when Nanna doesn't look. I saw her twice. Then the beauty baby, she—ah, she unswallows."

"I see," said Mark, very gravely, though Black let himself smile. "It makes her sick—that sugar that is not sugar."

"Yes, yes. You understand. I have to tell, though the lady is kind to me."

"Is it Mrs. Mersereau?"

"I dunno. I know no names except Mrs. Steele, and she is not here now. Candy, you?"

"Oscar, you get that candy only after you have told me who the lady is."

The boy broke into wailing tears. "I can't—I *can't* ——" he sobbed.

"Well, come along, then, and we'll get the candy, and some other time you'll point out the lady."

"No; never—not never!"

Mark, with discerning judgment, said no more on the subject of the lady, but took the boy to the candy shop and bought for him his favorite soft confections. The powdered sugar from the marshmallows and from the Turkish paste fell on his clothing, and he brushed it off with a clean handkerchief. He was a tidy chap.

Sending the half-wit home, Mark went at once to Patricia Raymond's house. As he crunched along on the crusted snow, he wondered if there was any truth in the story of the lady and the baby's food. But he remembered Stone had said the lad was truthful, so far as his weak brain would allow.

He had a long confab with Patricia and her mother, which culminated in a plan for Mrs. Raymond to bring the little Pansy Ann and her nurse

over there for a visit. Mark told them they could say it was at Irma's orders, and he would see Irma, and he knew she would gladly sanction the arrangement.

So, that very afternoon, the baby and nurse were installed at the Raymonds' and, though greatly surprised, Lily Mersereau was rather relieved.

Irma agreed gratefully, feeling that her darling would be safer with Mrs. Raymond than in the home without a mother.

It was about dusk that same evening that she sat by the window of her cell, wondering if anyone ever had so much and such heartrending trouble as she had, pondering over the attitude of Ray Booth, and questioning the possibility of her agreeing to his bargaining.

It was not very cold and the small cell was close, so Irma opened the window, leaving an iron-barred square in place of the lower pane.

She sat on the edge of her hard bed, and strove to preserve her poise. She was really afraid at times that she would collapse and go into hysterics, and this she determined to prevent, if possible.

As she sat there, in the deepening dusk, a strange thing happened. A snowball came whirling in through her window. Between the bars it came, and dropped to the floor.

But, the snowball was aflame!

Irma couldn't believe the evidence of her senses. She rubbed her eyes with her hand, but the snowball, growing perceptibly smaller, blazed merrily

on. She went nearer, but dared not touch the thing. Had she, then, lost her mind?

No, she pinched her arm—she was awake and alert.

“Till ice shall burn and snow shall flame ——”
God, was the Curse lifted? Was her baby safe?

The snowball disappeared, leaving a tiny spot of wetness, which in turn dried away. Motionless, she sat staring at the place where the phenomenon had rested.

And then, whizzing again, came a second snowball, an ice ball this time, aflame like the other, blazing like the other, but a ball of hard ice.

What did it mean? What could it mean?

It must be, it *had* to be the removal of the Dercia Curse!

No more was she under a ban for having married a Dercia, when she herself had ashen hair. No more was the life of the youngest Dercia forfeit, because she had seen, with her own, wide-awake eyes, the flaming ice and the burning snow! She had no thought of any natural explanation for the miracle, she knew only that the stipulation was fulfilled, the Curse was lifted.

She knelt in a long prayer of gratitude, then rose to her feet, and prepared for bed, with a heart at last at peace. Pansy Ann was safe—*must* be safe, and Irma Steele had the first good night's sleep she had had in a long time.

Next morning she feared to open her eyes lest she should determine it was all a dream. But no. On

the floor, at the two spots where the entering snowballs had fallen, were two brownish, charred marks, which could have been made only by something burning there.

Scrutinizing them carefully, Irma saw they were real, and not imaginary.

The wardress, coming in, wondered what had transfigured the prisoner.

"You look as if you'd had a vision," said the awed woman.

"I have!" replied Irma. "A miracle has been sent me, and it has made me happy."

Aloud, the wardress said only, "Yes, ma'am." But to herself she said, "Nutty! I thought she'd go that way!"

Chapter XVII

*"I go away, this blessed day,
To sail across the sea, Matilda!
My vessel starts for various parts
At twenty after three, Matilda!"*

W. S. GILBERT.

WITHOUT doubt, when one is in a hurry, the slowness of an ocean liner is the most intolerable, the most exasperating slowness possible to imagine. Even a patient, philosophical passenger is minded to get out and push.

And if the call at the other end of the trip is urgent, the days drag by, punctuated only by their inevitable and immutable meals, with the slow length of Pope's needless Alexandrine.

Yet facts are facts, and Fleming Stone knew that his eagerness to get to Gibraltar would in no way hasten the steamer's speed. So he took his enforced vacation with all the equanimity he could muster up, and he walked the deck or sat in his steamer chair with the same appearance of nonchalance as the other and less impatient passengers.

The day came at last when the great rock loomed on the horizon.

Joyfully stepping down the gangplank, Stone was the first man to land. He had always rather liked Gibraltar, looking upon it as a way-station, but he had never been over to Algeciras.

Evading the straggling vendors of wares, who followed him, he made inquiries at once for the steamer that would take him to his destination. He had not long to wait, and was soon seated in a wobbly little boat that carried him safely across to the beautiful region of southern Spain.

Stone had æsthetic tastes which were in no way dulled by his life work of solving crime mysteries, and he entirely agreed with the encomiums he had heard lavished on Algeciras.

It was nearly sunset when he arrived, and he went at once to the inn where, Irma had told him, she first met Carlos Dercia.

Having attended to his belongings—he was traveling light—and engaged a room, he asked the bland and voluble proprietor if he knew the family of Dercia.

"Who does not?" was the reply. "Surely no one in Algeciras."

"And who is the head of the house?"

"Roderigo—a great, a fine man."

"Roderigo Dercia. Would he see me, think you, if I presented myself?"

"But surely! He is affable and of great courtesy."

So, after a supper of truly Spanish oiliness and spiciness, Fleming Stone set off for the Villa Dercia. He had no letter of introduction, he had no credentials, but he trusted to his own wit and ingratiating manner to get an audience. Nor was he mistaken.

The elaborate functionary who ushered him into

the presence of the master of the house announced his name, bowed deeply and vanished.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Stone," said a rich, musical voice, in perfect English accent; "pray be seated."

They were on a wide balcony, open to the stars, but protected from the chilly sea winds by glass panels. Palms and flowers were about, and birds in cages.

Stone sat down with a few words of admiration for the beauty of the situation.

"Yes," agreed Dercia, "this slope of ground is picturesque, if not always convenient. The motor paths are good, but it is difficult for foot travel."

"That is the Public Garden, down below us?"

"Yes, the music will begin soon. It is beautiful heard from up here."

He paused, seemingly awaiting the explanation of Stone's presence. So the detective broached the subject at once.

"I fear what I have to say," he began, "may arouse painful memories; but in the interests of justice, it must be said, and I beg of you to listen and to assist, if possible."

Roderigo Dercia looked up quickly. He was a handsome man, of Spanish type, yet with English manners, and a general air of cosmopolitan knowledge. In Spanish costume, he would have been a fit subject for the old masters to paint; in modern English dress, he was unpicturesque, but a courteous and charming host. He looked very much like Carlos Dercia, whose picture Stone had seen in the

files of newspapers he had gone over, when hunting out the details of Irma's trial.

"I rather think, then," Don Roderigo said, slowly, "that what you have to say bears upon the death of my brother Carlos."

"You are right," Stone returned, with equal gravity. "May I ask you some questions regarding that matter?"

"I cannot forbid you, sir, but I can and do say, I would much rather you did not ask them."

"I am sorry," Stone spoke gently, "but I fear I must. You are an advocate of justice, I suppose?"

"In some conditions, yes."

"And in others, no?"

Roderigo Dercia bowed.

The gentleness disappeared from Stone's voice, and he spoke in a sharper tone.

"I trust then, you will consider the conditions I want to speak of as conditions calling for justice. Do you know who killed your brother Carlos?"

"It was never decided by the authorities ——"

"I did not ask that," Stone was suave, but direct. "I ask if you know."

"No, then, I do not."

"You desire to know?"

"No, I do not."

Stone paused then. Could it be that Roderigo was himself mixed up in the murder? Supposing he had been heir to some of Carlos' great fortune ——

"No, Mr. Stone, you are wrong," and the great,

dark eyes of his Spanish host looked upon him reproachfully.

"You are a mind reader, then?" and Stone, entirely unembarrassed, calmly returned his gaze.

"It required no second sight to see what was passing through your mind."

"No, I suppose not. Therefore, Don Roderigo, if you are in no way implicated in the crime, why not tell me all you know about it? I have come all the way from New York to learn what you can tell me, and I do not want to go back unsatisfied."

"You are, then, a detective?"

"I am. And I am working in the interests of my client, who was once the Señora Dercia."

"She was cleared of that accusation; she was adjudged innocent."

"True. But she is again accused. Of a similar crime. Of killing her second husband."

Dercia looked his amazement.

"But this is terrible! The poor child—my heart bleeds for her!"

"If that is true, if you are sincere, you can be of great help, and you can perhaps staunch the bleeding of your heart."

Stone was far from being sure of the other's genuine sympathy, but his veiled sarcasm was lost on his hearer.

"She married again, then?" The Spaniard was showing the deepest interest.

"Yes, she married an American, one of her own countrymen."

"In defiance of Carlos' forbidding her to do so."

"Your brother married her in defiance of the Dercia Curse."

"Truly, he did." The speaker's voice fell to an awed whisper. "How did they dare?"

"Come now; you, as a rational man, must agree that it is absurd to refrain from marrying the woman you love, merely because she has fair hair."

"Your race does not have the superstitions we have, nor do you have the same respect for ancestral traditions."

"That's true enough. But, listen. Mrs. Steele—that is her name now—is under arrest for poisoning her second husband, in the same way that Dercia was poisoned."

"Phosphorus!"

"Exactly. And given secretly, so that the death was at first ascribed to liver disease."

"My God! How amazing!"

For some reason the man's exclamations sounded odd to Stone. They seemed forced or artificial.

Then he realized that doubtless Dercia would have expressed himself more fluently in his own language, but, having elected to talk only English to his visitor, the expletives came unfamiliarly to his lips.

"Amazing, yes, that anyone could suspect that woman of murder. You do not for a moment think she killed your brother?"

"No! A thousand noes! Of course, she did not!"

"Then why did you not stick at it, and find out who did kill him?"

Dercia shrugged his graceful shoulders.

"What use? She was freed. She had her freedom, her child, her fortune. She went away, content, so far as I knew. Happy, so far as I knew."

"Happy! With that blot on her 'scutcheon?"

"There was no real blot. She was freed, once and for all."

"And now again in durance for the same falsely attributed crime."

"How did it happen?" Dercia spoke as if scarcely able to believe it did happen.

"We don't know how it happened, that is, we don't know who provided the poison, but we are sure it was not Mrs. Steele."

"And you are sure she did not poison my brother?"

"Of course, we are sure of that—and so are you."

"And you are here—why?"

"To get the truth, Don Roderigo. To learn for a certainty, who poisoned Carlos Dercia, and, afterward, poisoned Wyatt Steele. For we are sure it was the same person, the same wicked, base-souled criminal in both cases."

"You can't be sure of that!" Dercia stared at him.

"I shall be, when I leave Algeciras. Now, are you with me, or not? Are you going to help me, or are you afraid to?"

"Afraid! No man may say that word to a Dercia!"

"Oh, I merely inquired. I take it, then, you are not afraid—you have nothing to fear."

"No, of course I have nothing to fear. But you have—or, will have. The matter is not so simple as you think—the settlement not so easy to come by, as you anticipate."

"I take all such risks. May I take it, then, that you will help?"

"To a degree, yes. All the way—no."

"Very well, let us start together, then. We agree that your brother's wife did not kill him?"

"I agree to that."

"And that, therefore, she did not kill her second husband?"

"That is not an indubitable conclusion, but, in my opinion, that woman would not kill anybody. Moreover, whether she did kill her first husband or not, it would be the height of folly to choose that same procedure for her second husband's carrying off. And Irma is no fool."

"No, you are right. She is not. Now, we are together in thinking her innocent of the two crimes. I wish you would tell me who was guilty of the first one."

"I do not know."

"You wouldn't accuse or denounce a woman, would you?" asked Stone, with a sudden flash of enlightenment.

"I would not."

"No. Quite right, so if I suspect a woman we can't get together on the next step. Will you look over these photographs?"

Stone handed Dercia a sheaf of pictures, some cabinet photographs, others snapshots. But they included all the guests of the Sunday supper party, with more than one likeness of some of them.

If ever Fleming Stone watched with the very concentration of absorbed attention, it was on that occasion. He was sure he would learn something from Dercia's reactions to these faces. If they were all strangers to him, he must show it by a lack of definite interest; if he knew any of them, he must show a gleam of recognition.

But the plan seemed worthless.

Dercia exhibited interest in every one of them. He praised the ladies' good looks, calling Serena a queen and Patricia a little fairy. He said Rita Delano was like a Spanish type, and that Lily Mersereau was a siren. His remarks were entirely respectful, and impersonal, as if commenting on pictures, not on real people.

The men he passed over more quickly, giving cursory comments now and then.

Mark Stanhope he declared a fine specimen of young manhood, and Colvin Kane he looked at almost affectionately.

"I'd like a son like that," he said, half under his breath.

Ray Booth and Austin Fenn he looked at with a rather vacant gaze, as if utterly disinterested, but

Stone observed him glance back at one of them—he couldn't tell which.

"Know either of those chaps?" the detective said, casually.

"No, but this face is familiar," and Dercia went on to the next and last picture, which was a very good portrait of Wyatt Steele.

"What, you know him? That is Irma's second husband, Mr. Steele."

"Oh, then I'm mistaken. I can't know him. He's never been here, has he?"

"No, I'm certain he never was. But you think you've seen him before?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so. A slight resemblance to some one I've seen somewhere, that's all. No, Mr. Stone, I don't know any of your friends," and he handed back the lot of pictures.

"You're a liar, sir," Stone said to himself, but to Dercia he said, "Thank you, I hardly expected you would."

"No, they seem to be all Americans."

"Yes, they are. Now, Don Roderigo, just a few more queries, and I'll take myself off. Is the house your brother and his wife occupied still your property?"

"Yes," was the somewhat curt reply.

"Is it occupied?"

"No."

"Would you have any objection to letting me go through it?"

"Searching?"

"Yes, of course."

"I don't altogether like that sort of thing."

"Why not?" Stone turned innocently inquiring eyes on the Spaniard.

"Oh, it seems so—so unnecessary."

"I'll be the judge of that," Stone replied, briskly.

"Will you give me the keys now, as I may get busy before you are up in the morning."

"What—what are you looking for?"

"For evidence of any sort that may lead me to the murderer of your brother. For it is my opinion that he is also the murderer of Wyatt Steele."

"You won't—you won't suspect a woman—will you?"

"Look here, sir, if you're shielding some woman, I'll tell you right now, and for your own good, you'd better not."

"I—oh, no—I ——"

"Who is she?"

"How abrupt you are! Well, Mr. Stone, I'll lay all my cards on the table. There was a—that is, my brother had a ——"

"Out with it—had a mistress, I suppose, before he married Miss Gale."

"Yes, just that. And she might be wrongfully suspected of the crime. So I beg of you not to suspect a woman."

"Yet you let Irma be suspected."

"I knew she'd get off. I—you see—I knew ——"

"Oh, some of the jurors, I suppose, or the judge

—well, you got her off, didn't you? And the other woman, the mistress, was she at all suspected?"

"No, never."

"What was her name?"

"Dolores."

"It would be! Dolores what?"

"I never knew. I never heard my brother say."

"Well, all right. I'll find out. Now, the keys, if you please, Don Roderigo Dercia."

And, getting the keys, Fleming Stone started back to the inn.

"By the way," Stone asked, after getting the bunch of keys, "do you know Mother Mullins?"

"N—no. Who is she?"

The hesitation stultified his assertion. Stone knew it for a falsehood and knew he had hit on an important point. The detective had puzzled over the fact of old Mother Mullins knowing so much about the Curse of the Dercias, and now he was sure that the old crone was, or had been, a servant in the Dercia family.

"Don't perjure yourself," he said, coldly, to Dercia. "You do know her. You may as well tell me who she is, or I will find out elsewhere. Good heavens, man, after I've come all this way to find things out, do you suppose I'll go back no wiser than I came? Who is the old woman?"

"No one of any importance. She was a servant in my father's household, but she disappeared many years ago."

"Not so many. She left Algeciras about the time

Mrs. Steele did. And about the time your brother's mistress, Dolores, did."

"Well, perhaps so. But what of it?"

"That's what I have to learn."

The two men took leave of each other politely and pleasantly, and Fleming Stone went back to the inn, full of new and rioting thoughts.

As he passed through the Public Garden, the band was playing some fine music. On an impulse, he went to the bandmaster, and asked if they would not play "Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo" for him.

They were most pleased to do so, and, taking a nearby seat, Stone listened to the beautiful strains.

"It is not surprising," he said to himself, "that on a summer night, with the soft south wind, the scent of flowers, and the rustling of the trees, two lovers should be so entranced by that song that they could not tear themselves apart. It is beautiful enough now, inside closed doors, but in summer, how different! Well, and so they succumbed to the beauty and music and let themselves forget all sorrow and loneliness!

"And then," his thoughts ran on, "the Spanish bridegroom had his Spanish mistress to reckon with. And he parleyed and compromised and promised, until, at last, Dolores found he was all and only the property of his wife, and she decided to kill him and make it appear the wife's work. Looks that way, anyhow."

But, next morning, he was not so sure of his theory.

As early as he could get off he took the keys and went over to the house that had been the home of Irma and Carlos Dercia. It was small but attractive and beautifully appointed. Apparently nothing had been touched since Irma left it, under arrest, though she had doubtless returned after her acquittal to pack up and depart. But the furniture was all in place, the belongings of Carlos seemingly as he had left them.

There seemed little to discover. The belongings of Dercia were of no moment, the costumes and small trinkets of Irma's even less so.

The desk attracted him as being of possible interest.

It was. Though the pigeon holes and drawers showed only a few receipted bills and valueless notes, yet the astute detective discovered a secret compartment which gave a rich yield. There were letters from the discarded mistress, though not signed Dolores. There were threatening notes from an enraged enemy and there were memoranda and lists of Dercia's own, that were decidedly enlightening.

Stone took them all, hunted further and found a walking-stick that bore initials that were not Dercia's, and, feeling that he had enough and more than enough, went back to his rooms at the inn.

That afternoon he sallied forth once more, this time to get in touch with the judge and jury that acquitted Irma. The judge spoke only Spanish, but he had a most intelligent interpreter who talked so

clearly and cleverly that Stone enjoyed the word-play.

"It is necessary that I inquire a little," he began.

"All you wish, Señor," was the polite response.

"First, then, why was the lady acquitted with so little questioning?"

"We couldn't understand her, nor could she get our intent. We had not this good interpreter then. We were at odds all through the witnessing."

"The truth, please," Stone said, implacably. "That is all falsehood."

"Then, we didn't want to convict a woman. It isn't done. We would always acquit a woman."

"Even if guilty?"

"She would not be guilty."

"However, that is not all the truth. Tell me."

And after a long time, by dint of the greatest insistence, Stone dragged it out of them that Don Roderigo had offered large payment to judge and jury if but his brother's wife was freed.

"It seems odd," Stone mused. "Why was he so anxious?"

Now Stone knew why the Don was anxious, but he wanted to see if the others knew. They expressed utter ignorance, however, and Stone decided to give up the struggle. He had all the information he wanted—except one item. And this was freely given him. It was merely the address of the chemist where the phosphorus was bought that killed Carlos Dercia.

So, to the shop in Cadiz Stone went.

Did the chemist remember the lady who bought the phosphorus? He did.

Would he pick her out from this lot of photographs? He would. At once he pointed to the picture of Patricia Raymond.

"Not right," said Stone, smiling pleasantly. "She has never been in Spain."

"Ah, my mistake. This is the one."

This time he chose Serena Tenney.

"Well, no," Stone demurred, "she can't be the one."

"Ah, sure, here, then."

Triumphantly, the clerk put his stubby finger on the picture of Lily Mersereau.

"Doubtful," and Stone looked uncertain. "Oh, no, it can't be that one. She's been dead for years," he said, mendaciously.

This seemed definite and final, so the chemist touched the only remaining one, which was Rita Delano.

"Not that lady," he said, shaking his head positively; "Señor, you have not the señorita's picture here."

"Apparently not," said Stone, and, gathering up his portraits, he went away.

He stayed only as much longer as he had to before the first available steamer came along, and then boarded it en route for the United States.

If the days had dragged coming over, they were twice as slow of progress going back, and Stone wondered whether he would live to reach home or

die of his impatience. He occupied his time sending wireless messages in code, some of which Mark Stanhope never did puzzle out.

But the final message, the direction of Fleming Stone to stage a reception for him, was carried out to the very letter.

Chapter XVIII

*"We've a first-class assortment of magic;
And for raising a posthumous shade
With effects that are comic or tragic,
There's no cheaper house in the trade."*

W. S. GILBERT.

WHEN Mark Stanhope at last received the long wireless message stating that Fleming Stone was on his homeward journey, and giving directions for his own reception, his joy knew no bounds. He could scarcely wait to lock himself in his room and get out his code-book, kept carefully hidden.

And the tenor of the message, at last made clear, was indeed cause for joy.

Without giving definite details, Stone distinctly implied that he had discovered the criminal and that Irma would be freed as soon as certain formalities could be attended to.

Both Stanhope and Irma had known from the moment of Stone's departure from Kavanagh that he had gone to Algeciras, to track down the criminal of the two murders, which he persistently judged to be the work of the same hand.

No one else knew of his whereabouts, though John Black and the two youngsters, Kane and Pat Raymond, knew that he was off on official business, and had not run away because of a threatening

anonymous letter, which the amateur sleuth, Ray Booth declared was the case.

Fleming Stone had hated to take the long time necessary for a trip to Algeciras and back, but he could see no other way to accomplish his ends. So, he left Mark in charge of matters in general, asked Irma for certain directions and addresses, and started off.

He kept continually in touch with the situation by means of long telegrams in code, and the little woman at the Kavanagh office was sadly put to it to guess what the gibberish might mean. But, of course, she had no idea Mark's long messages were from Stone, and he answered them at a New York station.

And, now, nearly four weeks after Stone had disappeared, he was returning to free the innocent and confound the guilty.

It would be a few days longer before his arrival, but Mark must keep the secret, and must tell no one at all, except Irma, that the outlook was bright. Irma, too, must be sworn to secrecy, for Stone made it plain that if his coming were known, the criminal would make a getaway.

Mark, who had always been an outspoken, frank sort of chap, had to put a tight curb on his inclination to shout in triumph. But he realized the seriousness of the situation, and, too, he had grown in wisdom of late, so he hid his joy and appeared as ignorant of the affair as possible.

Ray Booth, in the absence of Stone, had blos-

somed out into a star detective, or thought he had, which is much the same thing. He called on Irma occasionally, and cheered her up, or tried to, with promises of future developments which should make her release imperative.

But he always hinted, even when he didn't say it openly, that her release depended on her attitude toward himself. She began to believe that if she agreed to marry Booth, he could save her from her impending fate. But she had a lingering hope that Fleming Stone would free her on his return from Spain.

She had no idea what Stone hoped to discover in Algeciras, but she knew he meant to ferret out the truth if possible. She had no idea, herself, who was the murderer of Carlos Dercia, but she knew some one had administered the poison with intent to implicate her. She had an idea it might be the brother, Roderigo, but she had no evidence or proof of this.

But now came Mark, and, under seal of secrecy, told her that Stone was on his way back, and would arrive in Kavanagh the next day but one.

She promised to give no hint of this to anyone at all, and, greatly cheered at Mark's news, she controlled her impatience and awaited the outcome of the great detective's trip.

"You'll see him as soon as he gets here, I suppose," she said, to Stanhope.

"I hope so. I don't know all his plans. But he has

directed me to get the whole supper crowd together at 'The Oriels,' on Sunday night."

"Six weeks from that other Sunday night," said Irma, softly. "It seems more like six months."

"Keep up a brave heart, dearest," Mark adjured her. "I have every faith in Stone—he'll pull this thing off. Any message for him?"

"Only this. I heard the music again last night—Carlos haunting me, you know."

"Where? Here?"

"Yes, just outside my window. Very low, oh, scarcely audible at all. But beautiful—just a few bars from 'Eira do Trigo.' How do you explain it, Mark?"

"Easily, but I can't tell you now. Stone made me promise—well, soon, darling, there'll be no more concealments between us. Good-bye, for now."

With a forced gayety, Stanhope left her, and went at once to the tiny grass plat that was just outside her barred window.

Close scrutiny of the ground showed him the thing he was looking for, and, cautiously, he picked a small leaf of a weed growing there. It seemed to be sprinkled with a fine white powder. This, Stanhope tasted.

He nodded his head, with a satisfied smile, plucked two or three more leaves, which he placed in a notebook, and went off, himself whistling, "Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo."

Then he went to the Police Headquarters, and was closeted for some time with the Inspector.

After the confab, Culliss said, "Well, it's wonderful. I thought, of course, that chap had chucked up the job, and there he was crossing the ocean! Sure, I'll do it all up in style. I'll get this list of ladies and gentlemen together at the Steele place on Sunday night, if I have to bring 'em in chains. What time did you say?"

"Eight o'clock. But, mind now, don't mention Stone's name to anyone. He says it will quash the whole business if his coming is suspected."

"Trust me. All right, young fellow, I hope we'll get the pretty lady out that same night."

"Lord, I hope so!" exclaimed Mark, fervently.

The dusk fell early on the short mid-winter day, and at half-past six on Sunday evening, no one noticed a man who got out of a cab at the side entrance to the inn and hastened into the building, and up to the room he had occupied when there before.

Fleming Stone was glad to get back to the simple comforts of this room, and welcomed the tray of dinner that was soon brought to him.

But, more eagerly, he welcomed the arrival of Mark Stanhope, and the two men, knowing their time was short, took up the most important questions first.

"Everything in trim?" asked Stone.

"Yes," Mark assured him. "All the crowd coming to-night at eight o'clock. Just the supper guests,

John Black, the house servants and a sprinkling of police."

"Fine. Now, I shan't appear till they're all congregated. And I don't want to tell you much of my work in Algeciras, for you'll get it all to-night. What about Oscar Percy?"

"You were right, Mr. Stone. He is the one responsible for the mysterious music."

"At whose orders?"

"Haven't found out. Oscar Percy won't tell."

"No matter. I think I know. How did he work it?"

"Cleverly enough. You see, there is a laundry chute—you know, the thing they shove soiled clothes down—and it is all closed up and not used any more. I believe they moved the basement laundry up to the kitchen floor or something. Anyway, it is boarded up, and doesn't show on any floor. But one can get into it by a little outside door, hidden by underbrush and low shrubbery. Well, Oscar Percy was induced to do this by presents of his favorite candy, and he was bound to secrecy by threats of terrible punishment, if he ever told who was directing him."

"How did you find out?"

"By overbidding the candy bribe. Now, you know, he's more or less of a musician, and he plays the harmonica like a virtuoso. Not much of an instrument, but played by one who understands it, it makes a sweet, faint melody. Anyhow, he did it. Sneaked in there at night, and played that air, which

had been taught him, and Irma thought it was supernatural. Also, he was the man behind the gun, with the strange light she saw. He had a flashlight, or lantern or something, fastened to a long fishing-rod, and he waved that around up in the chute, while he remained on the basement floor. It's a simple scheme enough, but clever, too, and it certainly worked. I wormed all that out of Mott, but I couldn't get at the name of his principal. Oh, yes, and a few nights ago, the music was played under Irma's window in the—where she is now. And when she told me, I went outside and looked, and I found white powder all over the grass there. And I tasted it and it was sugar. You know Mott is forever eating marshmallows or Turkish paste, and he spills their sugar coating all about. That's how I first spotted the laundry chute. I found lots of sugar outside the little hidden door."

"Good work!" commended Stone, heartily. "That was fine, Mark. I know, I think, who superintended Mott's maneuverings, but soon we'll all know. How's the child?"

"All right, now. She was beginning to be ill, but Mott himself threw a scare into us. He said a bad lady was poisoning the child's food. That is, he didn't say that outright, but kinda sorta, you know. Anyway, he wouldn't tell us who the bad lady was, but I have a notion it was Mrs. Mersereau. However, we took the baby, the nurse and all over to Pat Raymond's for a time, and Mrs. Raymond is looking after her. The child seems well enough now."

"Irma know all this?"

"No, I thought better to keep it from her. She'd worry so."

"Right. You've shown good judgment, boy, all the way through. Now, you'd better be getting along to 'The Oriels.' Oh, one more thing. How did the snowball scheme pan out?"

"Good Lord! Were you at the bottom of that?"

"Oh, I just told the youngsters how to do it. Did it come off all right?"

"I'll say it did! Why, Irma swallowed it all as a special providence and she believes implicitly that the Dercia Curse is lifted now that she has seen flaming ice and burning snow. Do tell me!"

"A simple trick. I read it somewhere, in some book of experiments. They say it is practiced by Indian Fakirs, though where they get snowballs in India, I dunno. But, you see, you merely make a snowball or an iceball, and insert in it a few bits of camphor. Of course, the camphor looks no different from the ice and snow, but, if lighted, will burn merrily for a few minutes. There's your explanation, and I'm glad those kids worked it all right."

"I say, need we tell Irma it was a hoax? She is so glad of it."

"No, don't tell her, if you can make Miss Pat and young Kane keep it quiet. They whooped with joy at the idea. And did our friend Booth find all the torn letters and bits of informative odds and ends I left in my waste basket?"

"He certainly did! Found the anonymous letter

and everything. He declared you had been scared off by the suggestion of a casket."

"Well, it isn't a pleasant suggestion. Now, off with you, and I'll stroll along later."

Stanhope went his way to "The Oriels," and found most of the crowd already assembled. They had been informed that the police wished to check up on some reports and would require their presence, and none of them felt any real apprehension that there was any revelation imminent.

Serena Tenney was resplendent in black velvet and pearls, while Rita Delano was garbed in scarlet chiffon. Diamonds glittered on her neck and arms, and her red satin slippers showed rhinestone buckles.

Lily wore pale jade green, and a profusion of what is known as "costume jewelry" to match.

Pat Raymond wore a fluffy yellow frock, and the men were in dinner jackets.

Save for the presence of John Black and the absence of the two Steeles, the party was just as it had been that other Sunday evening, Mark, on his arrival, completing the roll-call.

Then Inspector Culliss and his detective arrived, and this somehow cast a damper on the gayety of the crowd. But it is not easy to be merry and festive when the arm of the Law is present, even though the sleeve of that arm shows no gilt braid nor brass buttons.

But if the police representatives induced a sort of embarrassed silence, broken only by valiant at-

tempts at casual conversation, that condition was as nothing compared to the bomb-like effect of the entrance of Fleming Stone.

He came in quietly, with a courteous "Good evening," and took a seat near Mrs. Tenney. Serena looked rather bewildered, and, in fact, out of all the assembly only Pat Raymond and Colly Kane showed gladness at Stone's appearance.

Yet, after a brief moment to recover his equilibrium, John Black smiled a welcome across the room, and the others managed to show more or less forced smiles. Stone wasted no time in preliminaries.

"I am just returned," he said, "from a trip to Algeciras, where I went to learn the truth about the killing of Carlos Dercia and Wyatt Steele. It was my belief that these two men were victims of the same murderer. But I am not so sure of that, now, and I want to ask the murderer or murderers—for they are here present—to confess. As you all know, confession is helpful in lightening punishment, and as the accusation will be made in a moment, anyway, it may be to your great advantage to confess."

There was no answer of any sort to this request, but Stone had hardly expected any. Murderers are loath to make confession, as a rule, always hoping something will turn up to prevent their secret from becoming known.

"I know the two of you who are implicated," Stone went on, looking at no one in particular. "You see, I took all your portraits to Algeciras with me, and so identified the two I have in mind. Those two

are responsible for the two deaths we are investigating—the two deaths caused by phosphorus-poisoning, in both cases mistakenly diagnosed by the physicians as yellow atrophy of the liver, in both cases, designed purposely to throw suspicion on an innocent woman, now imprisoned for this crime.”

There was a long pause, but no one spoke.

“You do not choose to confess,” said Stone, in a crisp, curt tone now. “Then, I will ask you all to accompany me on a short expedition. Get your wraps, everybody.”

The maids came to the assistance of the ladies, Gregg and Hicks waited on the men, and the policemen kept a wary eye on certain of the members of the party.

“Just a short walk,” said Stone, as they left the house and stepped out into the cold, clear night air.

The stars were shining on the wide expanse of icy snow, and Stone grasped the arm of Serena Tenney to help her keep her balance. The others walked along, at a brisk pace, and, following Stone’s lead, soon saw that they were nearing the beautiful little cemetery of the town.

Through the tall stone gateway, along the box-bordered path, they were made to pause at the low gate leading into the Steele lot.

The new grave of Wyatt Steele showed, as yet, no monument. There were a few withered and frozen flowers on it, and the ungrassed mound showed stark and awful in the dim starlight.

There was no moon, and the nearby pine trees

and poplars shook and whispered in the cold, fitful wind. No word was said; the whole party stood in line along the front boundary of the lot.

"For the last time," said Fleming Stone, his voice inexorable in its awful accusation, "does the murderer wish to confess?"

There was no word of reply, though a sound of fear and horror issued from more than one throat.

One more moment Stone waited, and then, seemingly arising from the very ground itself, there appeared a misty, wraith-like figure, who raised a long, menacing arm. Not white, but of a luminous, vaporous gray, the figure became by degrees more distinct, until, at last, it could be seen that it was a man—a handsome man in full Spanish dress.

The raised arm extended a pointing forefinger, directed at one of the line of spellbound watchers.

"Carlos!" came in an agonized shriek, and Rita Delano fell in a dead faint.

Those nearest her turned to lift her, but others still stared in fascination at the ghostly figure.

The vision, phantom, or whatever it might be, pointed now at another—a man—and the man shrank back into himself in abject fear. The accusing finger was raised a bit higher, the awful finger came a step nearer, and the white, glistening countenance was like that of a risen dead man.

"Carlos!" screamed another voice, a man's this time, and Ray Booth crumpled up and fell to the ground.

"All over," Stone said, in a relieved voice. "Get them home."

"Where?" asked some attendants who seemed to have materialized out of thin air, but who were very real policemen.

"Better go back to 'The Oriels,'" Stone said. "We must question them, and I fear Mrs. Delano is really ill."

Well, they questioned them, and, owing largely to the shattered condition of their nerves, by reason of the appearance of what certainly seemed like a ghost, both Rita and Booth were limply willing to tell all they knew.

Rita was faint and exhausted. She admitted all that she was accused of, seeming anxious only to get the ordeal over.

"Protect me," she wailed, "and I'll tell you all about it! I'll testify against Ray! He went back on me, and I'll get even with him!"

"Who killed Carlos Dercia?" asked Stone, who was alone with Rita and the two police officials.

"Ray did," she replied, speaking quietly now.

"And who killed Steele?"

"Ray did," she repeated, but her lowered eyelids and shaking voice gave the lie to her words.

"Booth killed Dercia, and Mrs. Delano poisoned Steele's food," Stone said to Culliss. "I know the facts now. You state that to Booth, and he'll confess."

So, leaving Rita in charge of others, they put Ray

Booth through a quiz. Like many murderers, he was cocky and self-conceited. He rather plumed himself on his success, even while cursing Fleming Stone for having been too damned smart.

"You killed Dercia, and your pal, Mrs. Delano, did for Wyatt Steele," said Culliss, following Stone's tip.

"You said it, old top," and Booth essayed a grin, which faded before the stern frown of the Inspector.

"Why?" went on Culliss.

"Oh, as Gilbert says, 'All for the love of a lady.' In fact, several ladies. You see, Rita was Don Carlos' mistress. He fell for the ashen-haired American girl, and threw off his Rita like an old glove. She wouldn't stand for that, and she begged me to help her pay off Carlos. Well, I was sweet on Rita then—Algeciras is a great place for sweethearting—and I agreed to bump off her Carlos if she'd marry me. She said yes, and then, well, it was team-work. She bought the phosphorus stuff ——"

"In Cadiz," put in Stone.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I showed him all the photographs, and the only one he was positive did *not* buy the poison was Mrs. Delano. So I knew it was she. They won't accuse a woman, those chivalrous Spaniards."

"Go on," said Culliss, curtly.

"Well," Booth went on, "I did give Carlos the stuff, in a highball. May as well own up—Rita'll tell anyway. So then, Mrs. Steele was accused, and my plan was to get her off scot free—not hard in that

land—and then marry her and her money. But I never had the chance of meeting her down there. Soon's she got her freedom she lit out for the U. S. A. and, naturally, I followed her up. She had never seen me in Spain and didn't know me at all. Neither had she ever seen Rita there. So, of course, our next move was to follow her up and see what we could do about it. But when we got on to her trail, she had married Steele. He really blackmailed her into that marriage. Said he'd tell all her past if she didn't."

"How did he know all her past?"

"She told him, thinking she needed legal advice. Well, then, by that time I, like a fool, had fallen for the ashen-haired beauty myself. Rita was all for killing Steele and making it seem so sure that Mrs. Steele had done it that she would be sent to the chair. Rita said she couldn't get out of it so easy in this country. So this time I got the phosphorus, and Rita administered it—put it in Steele's portion of the Spanish omelet she concocted."

"Yes," Stone said, "I was on to that. The luminous powder was noticed on his plate. That's what gave me a real good steer."

"Oh, Lord," groaned Booth. "We sure played to bad luck! And we had awful good side lines. The mysterious music——"

"Mysterious no longer—Mott," said Stone.

"Oh, you! And the Curse, the baby's getting sick——"

"Stopped in time by somebody seeing Rita doctoring the child's food."

"Too many against us. All right, you're on. I'll take my medicine. But it was a dandy scheme—if it hadn't fallen through. What a pity!"

"Would you have come across," Stone asked, "if I hadn't rigged up that graveyard ghost? It was Mott, you know."

"No—I don't think so. That crashed my nerve, and it did for Rita! She's awful afraid of the supernatural—spooks in particular. She'd never have come around without that jolt."

"And you thought I ran because of your note about the casket," Stone smiled.

"Well, I did and yet I had an uncomfortable feeling that you hadn't. I felt sure you weren't the sort to show the white feather, but when you were gone so long, I began to hope you were gone for good."

"You had the idiot boy right under your thumb."

"Of course. He's most amenable if you understand him. And Rita did. She gave him nothing but the candy he loves so, and a few smiles, but he would do whatever she told him, and exactly as she told him. And he never peached on her."

"Until he saw her poisoning the baby's food. He said a lady sprinkled on it sugar which was not sugar. But he wouldn't give her name."

"No, he has a queer loyalty."

"Just why was Mrs. Delano so anxious to get Mrs. Steele?" asked Culliss.

"Why, because she stole her Spanish lover," said

Booth, surprised at the question. "Rita, then called Dolores, adored the man, Carlos. And to be cut out by a fair-haired American roused the devil in her. Some devil, too! Well, then, when I fell for Irma, up here, I thought maybe I'd get her off scot free, marry her and so bask in the Dercia wealth after all. I promised Rita half of it, if she'd help me get Mrs. Steele off. But she wouldn't—she never got over the loss of Carlos. That's why she was so knocked out by his ghost."

"A sordid story," commented Culliss.

"A horrible story," said Stone. "I found it all out over in Algeciras, and the Dercia brother is no better than he might be. But those things are outside our jurisdiction. All right, Booth, you've come clean; I've no more to say to you. By the way, I found your walking-stick in Dercia's house."

And, with a curt nod, Fleming Stone passed out of the ken of Ray Booth, and the police carried on.

Stone returned to the group in the living-room, and told them the main facts of the case, and said they could consider themselves dismissed.

Quietly and almost with the air of mourners leaving the scene of a funeral, they dispersed, and most of them went home.

Pat Raymond and Colly Kane stayed a bit, and wanted to go with Stone and Mark to take the glad news to Irma. But Stone wouldn't allow this, and after thanking them for their good work with the snowballs, and asking them never to let Irma know it was a hoax, he sent them home.

Then Stone and Mark started for the county jail to rescue the dear prisoner.

"What did you mean," asked Mark, as they speeded along, "when you said the key of the whole thing was one letter, one of the first seven of the alphabet?"

"I was just being funny," Fleming Stone admitted. "You see, the whole thing hinged, in a way, on that Spanish song, 'Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo.' Now, that song is in the key of A flat, and I meant that key. You know how that song has helped us all the way through. Mott's haunting music, the memories it revived of Algeciras, moonlight and love. And, too, I recognized one day that Booth was unconsciously whistling that air. That's what first directed my suspicion toward him. Oh, yes, the key of A flat was the key we wanted."

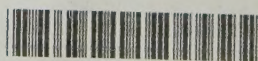
Mark smiled, but they were even then nearing the jail.

On reaching it, Stone said, "No, boy, I'm not going in with you now. You take the glad tidings and may you both live happy ever after."

"We will," said Stanhope, leaping from the car, "and we owe it to you. We shall not forget that! Good night, old man, see you to-morrow!"

And Mark, hurrying along the old stone-floored corridor, whistled, to announce his coming,

"Unha Noite na Eira do Trigo——"



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